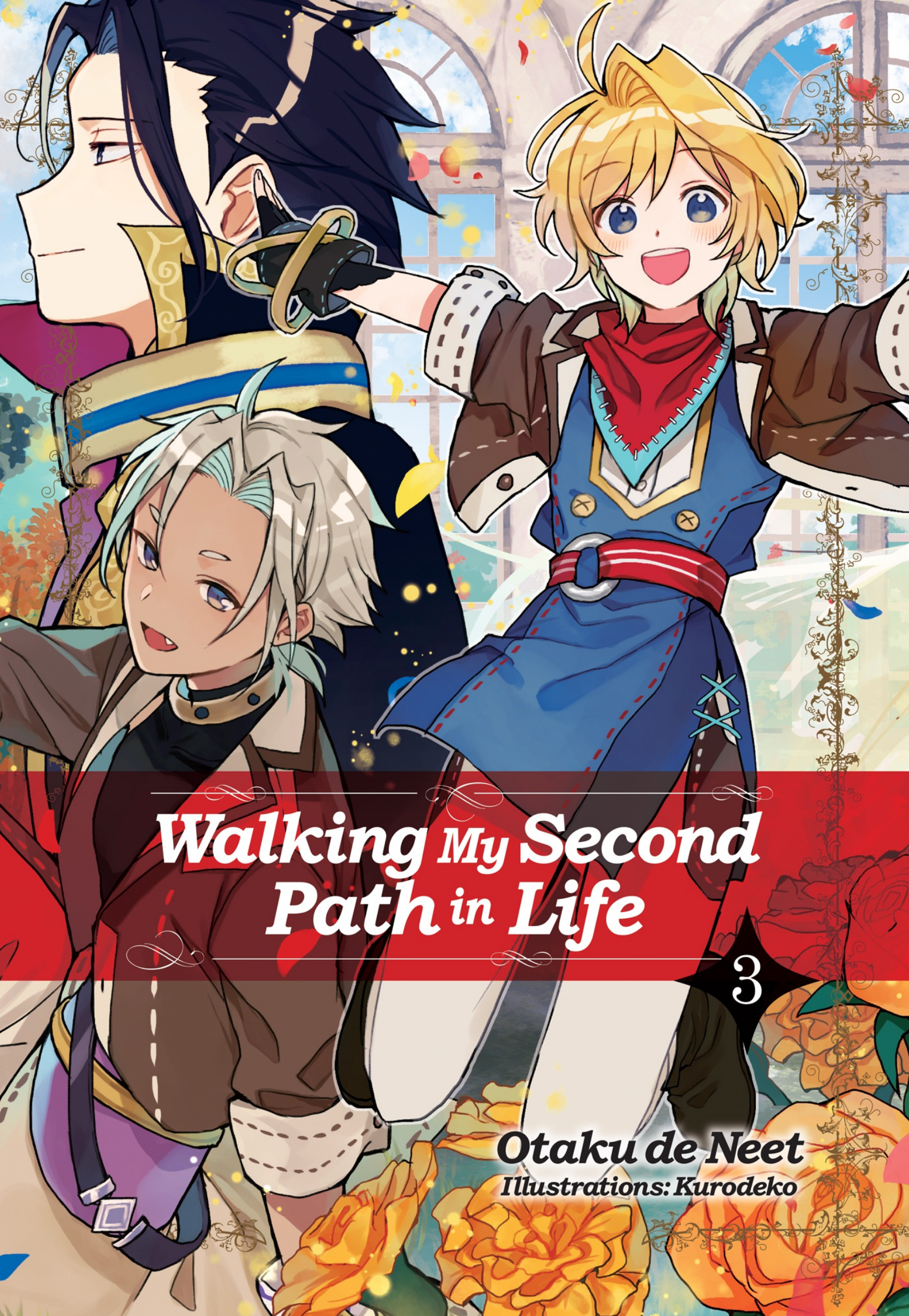


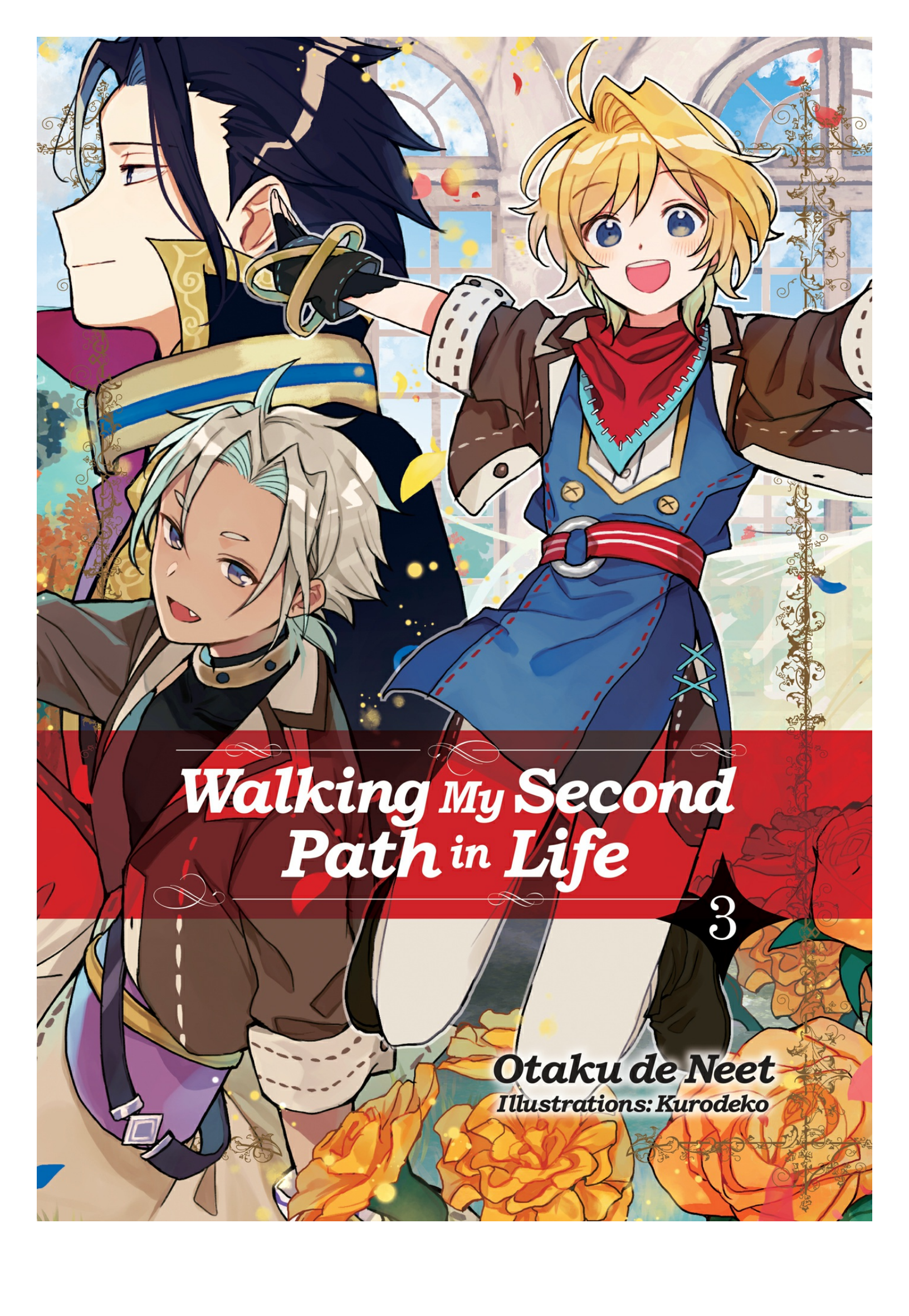


Walking My Second Path in Life

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Otaku de Neet
Illustrations: Kurodeko





Walking My Second Path in Life

3

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*Walking My Second
Path in Life*





Fie (Heath)

← An optimistic gal with a lot of pluck, Fie is a princess who was married off to the king of Orstoll as an unwanted bonus prize for marrying her sister. Fed up with wasting her life in the consort's chambers, Fie broke out, disguised herself as a boy, and now lives her days as a squire named Heath.



Queen

A recent addition to the north dorm, Queen is a skilled swordsman who almost never loses. He knows that Heath is actually a girl.

Squires (North Dorm)

Gormus

One of Heath's dorm mates, Gormus's tough guy appearance and considerable skills can make him a bit intimidating. However, he has a lot of common sense and always keeps a cool head.

Remie

One of Heath's dorm mates, Remie often gets heated in discussions about knights, but he is normally a kind and gentle soul.



18th Platoon

Crow

A cheerful older knight that Heath admires. With his dashing good looks, heaps of fans, and top-notch skills, Crow can do no wrong—apart for being a shameless skirt chaser, that is.



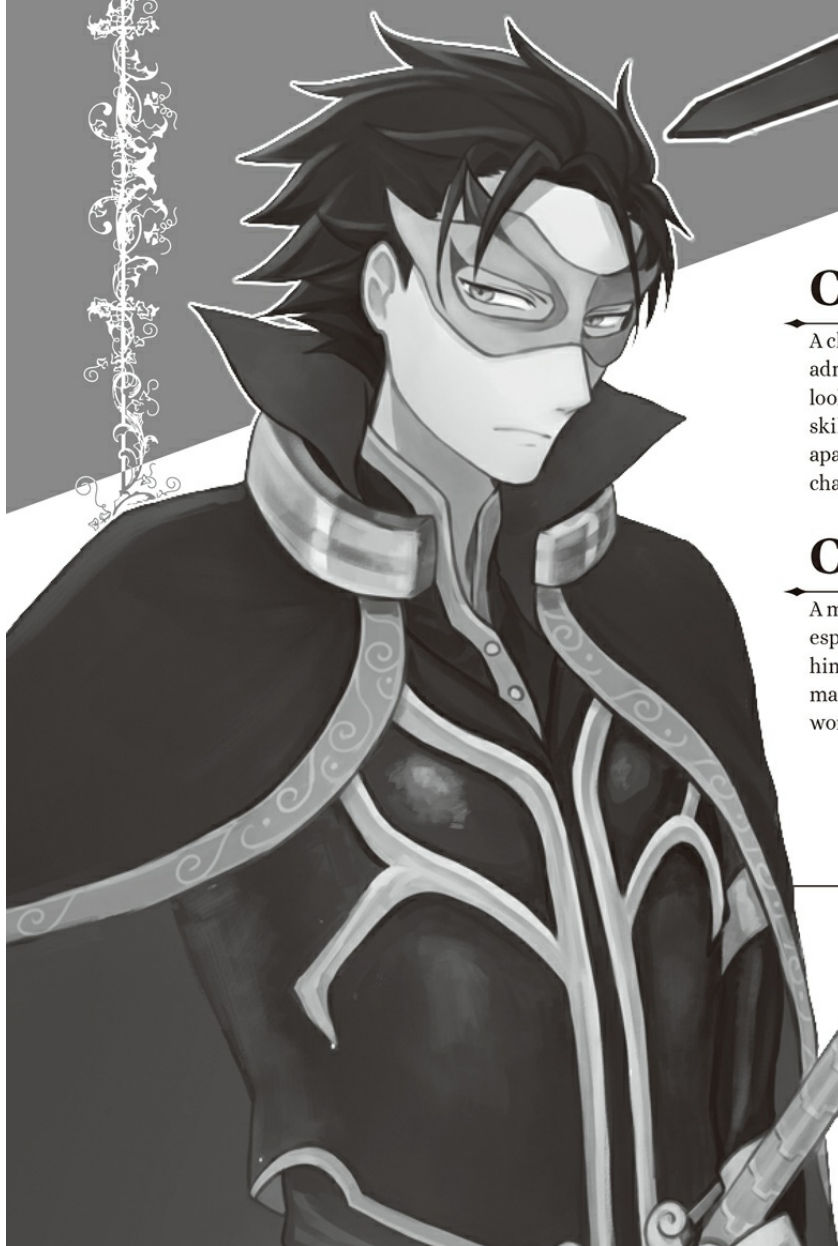
Conrad

A master of disguise in charge of espionage, Conrad can transform himself from an average-looking man to a drop-dead gorgeous woman.



Yore (Roy)

Captain of the 18th platoon, Heath isn't the only one who idolizes him for his superior swordplay. Yore is also secretly King Roy of Orstoll.





The Story So Far



As the eldest princess of the backwater country of Daeman, Fie's never been treated well. Everyone's always comparing her to her younger sister, who's better than her in every way, especially when it comes to looks. Then one day, her sister marries the king of Orstoll, and Fie is forced to tag along and marry him too.

Unfortunately, Orstoll isn't so keen on having her either, and they don't exactly roll out the welcome wagon. Fed up with this terrible treatment, Fie breaks out of the castle, disguises herself as a boy, and sets off down her second path in life as the squire Heath.

Thanks to all her mentors in the platoon she belongs to and all the friends she makes amongst the squires, Fie finally feels like she belongs somewhere for the first time in her life. She and her friends connect even further when they're made to go toe-to-toe with the formidable east dorm squires and pull off an astounding victory.

Then one day out of the blue, just as Fie is really beginning to enjoy life for the first time, the one person who knows she's really a girl, a boy named Queen, tells her he has a crush on her. The issue is, Fie's gender isn't the only thing she's been hiding. Feeling bad about lying to him, she reveals her true identity, but that only serves to make Queen like her more.

See, Fie's never had anyone express this much affection for her before, and due to her circumstances, she's never felt this way for anyone else either. Seeing her so puzzled about what to do with Queen's earnestness, an older knight tells her that in romance, you take both the good and the bad. With that encouragement, Fie chooses to respond to Queen's feelings and go out with him.

Now the stage is set for Fie and Queen to live out their days as squires, while hiding this secret relationship.



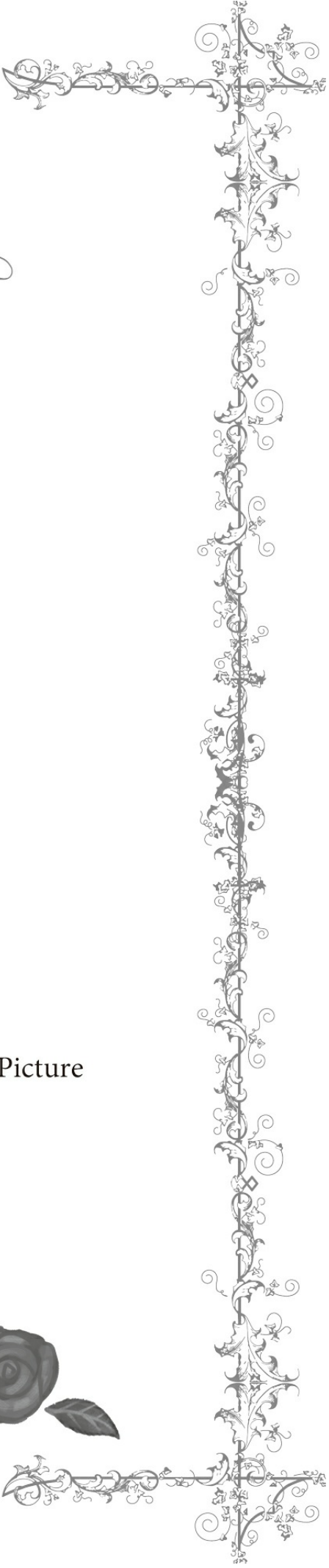
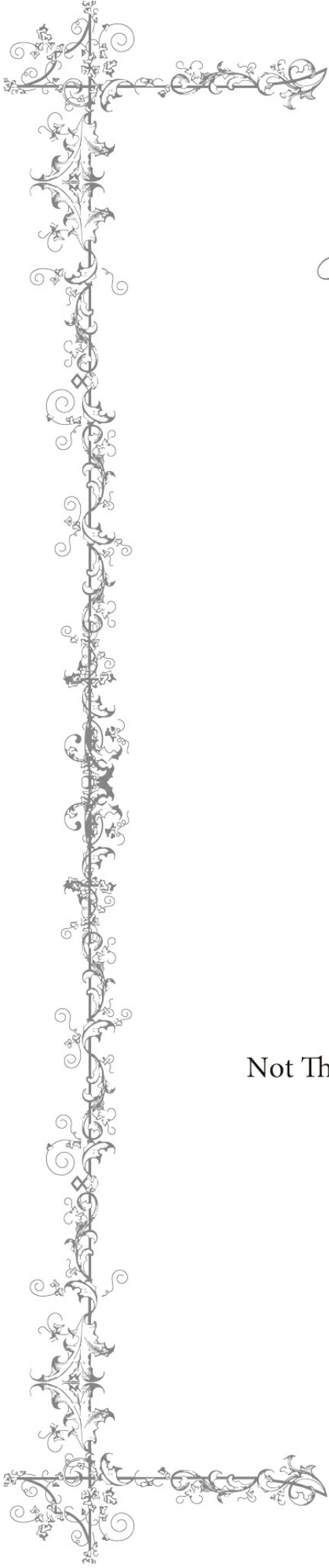


Table of Contents

Chapter 25
The Circus Is Coming to Town!

Chapter 26
An Unexpected Parting of Ways

Chapter 27
Handling Fie's Case

Chapter 28
Fielle and the Pottery Prince

Chapter 29
The Peculiar Second Wife

Chapter 30
When the Little Devil Is Gone

Chapter 31
Knocked Over with a Fie-ther

Chapter 32
A Cloud with a Silver Lining

Chapter 33
Not That Everyone's Really Gotten the Full Picture

Chapter 34
Epilogue

Side Story
Tracking Down the Mystery Man



Chapter 25 — The Circus Is Coming to Town!

Six months after the East—North Interdormitory Duel, Fie and her friends began their second year of squire training.

Fie hummed a cheerful tune to herself as she walked down the capital's main street. The pouring rain had let up for the time being, leaving a clear, blue sky shining over Wienne. A refreshing breeze caressed her cheek, putting her in a wonderfully good mood. She had set out on her usual errands today, but decided to take the long way around in order to enjoy the especially fine weather.

As she approached the riverbank, she smelled the wonderful aroma of grilled chicken with sauces and herbs. There stood a stall selling herbed chicken skewers. Fie was immediately captivated. The stall owner called out to her, "Well, come on now, lad. What say you try one? They're fresh off the grill and absolutely delicious!"

Fie's stomach grumbled in response. She thought to herself, *I should get some for the others too.* "I'll take fifteen, please," she said.

"Right you are."

That meant two apiece for Queen, Gormus, Slad, Remie, and Gees, making a total of ten. As for the other five, two were for Fie to munch on during her walk, two more to eat with the others. There was no point in stopping at fourteen skewers though, Fie reasoned, so she bought one more to make it a round fifteen. *Obviously*, it was not simply that she wished to eat another one herself.

She giggled to herself as she lifted one out of its paper wrapping. The fat, melting in the heat of the sun's rays, glittered in an utterly mouthwatering fashion. Just as she made to pop it in her mouth and swallow it all in one gulp, a familiar voice called out behind her, "Hey, don't you know it's bad manners to eat while walking?"

Fie immediately recognized the voice and grinned. "You do it too, Crow," she

pointed out. “Remember when you were on patrol the other day?”

“I had no time to sit down and eat, so what else was I supposed to do? I take my guard duty seriously for the good of the city’s public security,” Crow justified with a haughty air.

Fie glared at him. “That’s a big fat lie. All you do is waste all your time chasing after every cute girl who crosses your path.”

Crow crossed his arms and nodded twice. “When nothing else is amiss, I do go around making polite inquiries to citizens, yes,” he posited innocently. “It’s not my fault everyone misunderstands this noble act. We lady-killers have it so hard.”

This did nothing to dissuade Fie from her glare. She absolutely did not trust Crow’s relations with women and never had. Even so, she wasn’t *really* picking a fight with him. This fell more into the category of playful teasing.

Cutting off Fie before she could raise another objection, Crow looked at the skewer in her hand and said, “But never mind all that. That chicken looks great. Say, how about sharing one with your favorite old-timer, huh?”

“Didn’t you say it was bad manners to eat while walking?”

“And I stand by that, but I never said you shouldn’t do it.” That, too, was only another part of their usual teasing.

Fie grumbled to herself. Sure, she talked back to Crow like this all the time, but she was also aware that Crow was always looking out for her. So be it, she thought, as she rationed out one of her five skewers to Crow. It caused her no end of sorrow to part with one when she had planned on eating the full set. She passed it to him with a bitter expression, and Crow, who had only asked for it in jest, looked guilty.

“Don’t be like that,” he told her. “On your next day off, I’ll take you out to eat, okay?”

That restored Fie’s spirits somewhat.

Crow had completely forgotten that she had such an attachment to her food. It wasn’t that Fie was particularly stingy; in fact, she was generous when it came

to sharing. However, she clung to her own food like nobody's business.

She was the same way a year ago too, Crow realized. He hadn't thought about that in a long time, but now he remembered how famished she had looked when they first met. Had that experience with near starvation caused this possessiveness around food? Compared to back then, Fie looked healthier, with rounder cheeks and a softness to her that, oddly, couldn't be described as chubbiness. At any rate, she was healthy, and that was all that mattered.

Suddenly struck by this odd burst of sentimentality, Crow popped the skewer into his mouth and patted Fie's head affectionately.

Fie tilted her head in confusion. Where did that come from? She had expected another one of Crow's jokes. Still, she enjoyed the affection, so she put up with it for now.

"Let's go back to the castle," Crow said.

"Sure," she agreed and fell into step next to Crow.

It was funny, he realized. Somewhere along the way, it seemed she had grown fond of him. Walking alongside her, Crow started to think that maybe he should look after her a little bit better.

Here stood the north dorm, home to many of the castle's squires. When Fie was called away by their instructor Heslow, Queen was left behind and decided to sit in on a conversation with his fellow squires. The other squires were now in their second year of training as well, but none of the boys had changed all that much since they were first-years. Neither had their conversations, which once again consisted of utterly trivial matters.

"Listen, I'm telling you, Miranda is obviously the best," said one boy.

"No way," another retorted. "Emer's by far the cutest!"

Today's topic of conversation was a new café called Ambiabière, which had recently opened up shop in the capital. As part of a rebranding after an older café went out of business, Ambiabière had hired pretty girls to dress as maids and serve as the waitstaff. It was an enormous hit with a large number of the

capital's menfolk. Now the squires were engaged in a passionate argument over which serving girl was the best.

"Miranda's the most beautiful girl in the whole city!" the first boy insisted.

"Oh yeah? Well, Emer's the most beautiful girl in the whole country!" the second fired back. The boys became more and more animated as they argued.

"You're crazy!" boy one exclaimed. "Fine, let's settle this with a duel!"

"Fine by me! Bring it on!"

"Hold it, hold it," a third boy interrupted. "Dueling's not allowed. Remember? That's an infringement of the Squires' Rules and Prohibitions, Squirely Made, Squirely Upheld, and For Our Own Squirely Good, Article 58: 'Dueling about Ambiabière never ends and is therefore prohibited'! And, of course, you shouldn't hurt each other over it either!"

Halfway through their first year of training, the boys had taken it upon themselves to create a set of rules and prohibitions. This had been born from a number of problems the north dorm squires had caused, each for their own various reasons, but the rules' two main goals were to avoid annoying each other and to avoid being told off by Heslow. Once a month, the squires held a meeting to introduce bills, dispute the contents of them, and pass them into law by majority vote. At this point in time, their list of laws already numbered over two hundred.

"Who cares?" the first boy roared. "I'll take the penalty! The lovely Miranda is worth any penalty!"

"That's right!" cried the second boy. "What's a little penalty anyway? No punishment will stop my love for the fair Emer!"

These laws were, by and large, self-enforced, but as not every squire attended the meetings, the boys (even those who'd voted on the law in the first place) sometimes forgot the huge number of laws they had set down.

"Er, let's see," the third boy muttered as he leafed through the records hung up on the dorm wall. "Ah, it says here that the punishment is spending three days with Heath."

“People say that’s even worse than the worst punishment we ever came up with, and that was the infamous ‘crabs on the banks of the Moon River’ punishment. And this is just a duel, isn’t it? I mean, they’re not exactly everyday occurrences. Why is the punishment so steep?”

“Because at one point, they were happening far too often,” the boy near the rule sheet explained. “We had over ten a day at times. And that’s obnoxious, of course, so we instituted this penalty. Naturally, we saw a sharp drop in the number of duels right after that.” Even the boys who had loudly insisted they would have nothing to do with the rules turned pale when they heard the penalty.

One boy gulped. The other suggested, “M-Maybe we should lay off on dueling for now.”

“Y-Yeah, I agree...”

Queen tilted his head in confusion. How was spending time with Heath a bad thing? He, on the contrary, very much enjoyed it. But of course he didn’t say this out loud, and the conversation continued without his input. Even with dueling no longer an option, the boys were still highly passionate about their preferred waitresses and picked up the argument from where they left off. Now there were even new supporters on each side.

“Miranda always smiles at me after she brings me my tea! I’d drink a million cups if it meant I got to see that smile!” one of the Miranda fans yelled.

“Emer’s great at drawing pictures in ketchup on the omelets!” an Emer fan countered. “And guess what? When you order a large, she always draws you a heart! I’m telling you, she loves us!” (Rather than this being excellent customer service, Queen had a hunch this was more like customer exploitation than anything else.)

Just then, a new challenger emerged with a sigh and a smirk. Holding his palms upward and shaking his head in a gesture of disgust, he said, “My goodness. You boys really don’t know a thing.”

This only served to enrage the arguing boys.

“Oh yeah? What’re you being so smug about?” asked one.

“Who’s *your* favorite?!” challenged another.

“You’ve all overlooked something terribly important,” the new boy said. “Ambiabière is so popular because you can be waited upon by pretty maids who would never give you the time of day otherwise. But these girls aren’t real maids. And we can meet the real thing. So why be so hung up on fake maidservants?”

“You do have a point...” one of the boys conceded with a frown.

Another boy, who looked just as downcast as all the rest, muttered, “But...all the real maids we know never treat us nicely...”

As the maids rose in seniority, they often entered into roles at the heart of the palace, which meant that many of the maidservants working near the dorms were around the same age as the squires. But being at that awkward age as they were, it was difficult for the squires to overcome this awkwardness and befriend the maids. Additionally, the maids were often warned away from the north dorm with rumors that it was full of problem children, which only made it harder for the boys to get the opportunity to actually talk with them. Granted, this difficulty wasn’t unique to the north dorm; the boys figured that the teenagers in the other dorms had similar struggles due to the nature of puberty.

Suddenly, the topic of conversation switched to Queen. “You have it lucky,” one of the boys told him. “The maids really like you.” Queen was, of course, the exception to those rumors about the north dorm. His popularity with girls stemmed from his good manners, great figure, and unique good looks. As testament to this, during the latter half of his first year of training, several girls had admitted to him they had crushes on him.

There were also Remie, Gees, and Persil from over in the east dorm. Together, these four made up the bulk of a small group of good-looking squires who refused to join in on the general skirt-chasing the others—learning by example from a particularly indecent portion of the knights—practiced. The east dorm also hosted both the self-proclaimed genius Rigel and his friend Luka, who both met the criteria, but their distinctive personalities placed them in another camp altogether.

Queen flushed and mumbled, “I’m not really interested,” betraying his

innocence.

“Sure, you say that, but you have to be interested in *someone*,” the first boy said.

Queen shook his head twice. The boy sighed. “All your popularity is going to waste...”

The boy next to him chimed in. “C’mon, you should start caring about girls more, Queen!”

“Wait, no, that’s a bad idea,” the first boy said. “He’ll just increase the competition!”

“How come Queen doesn’t care for girls but is popular anyway, but when we want to get girls, they all think we’re losers?”

“It’s bizarre...utterly bizarre...”

Queen was at a loss as well. His eyebrows bunched in a worried frown. Presently, Queen was dating the girl he liked the most, but this was a secret to everyone around him. He was perfectly happy with his girlfriend; the thought of going after someone else and cheating on her was absurd. He knew that if he did and Fie were to break up with him, he would regret it for the rest of his life. That was why he truly was not interested in other girls—Fie was the only one for him.

The topic of conversation then suddenly leaped to this aforementioned girlfriend.

“You know what’s bizarre?” one of the other boys put in. “Heath. I don’t get at all why the maids are all over him either!”

“Right! He does just as many stupid things as we do, doesn’t he?!”

Heath was a girl who lived in the north dorm along with Queen and the others, disguised as a boy so she could train to be a squire. Her real identity was Fie, a princess of Daeman and the second wife of King Roy of Orstoll. Now if anyone was a problem child in this group, it was Fie. She was the biggest troublemaker in the dorm and had a habit of sticking her nose into all sorts of scuffles. Hating to be left out of anything, she had tagged along with some of

the other boys during their previous attempts at flirting and ended up right in the thick of that too. It would have come as a shock to no one if the maids had ignored her, but oddly enough, they didn't seem to mind her. They still chastised Fie from time to time, but Fie always managed to make up with them in short order. The maids considered her to be a cute but rambunctious scamp, which gave her a unique position with them. The boys could not make heads or tails of what Fie was doing differently.

"Queen," one of the boys raged, "has Heath ever told you his secret trick for getting girls to like him?!"

"Yeah!" another boy cried. "It makes no sense that he's as popular as he is. He must have some kind of trick!"

"Absolutely! He's using some dirty rotten trick! Queen, you go tell him we said that!"

The boys pressed in on Queen. Another joined the fray, yelling, "Time for the dog to become a wolf!"

Queen's eyebrows bunched together in a worried frown, and he shook his head. By his reckoning, Fie's luck with the maids was nothing more than her ability to sympathize with them as a fellow girl and act accordingly. Sure, her enthusiasm made her go a bit overboard at times, but she was a lovely person overall. Even if you were mad at her, you still wanted to be her friend. "I don't want to be like Sir Crow or anything," she had admitted once, "but it would be kind of nice to be popular." (As her boyfriend, Queen couldn't help but feel a sense of impending doom at those words.) So Heath's—or Fie's, rather—popularity with the maids was no trick at all.

And speak of the devil, just then Fie walked in, saw the boys gathered around, and ran over, thinking something interesting was going on. "Hey guys, I'm back!" she called. "What are you all up to? Is it fun? It's something fun, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's nothing," one of her classmates responded.

"And even if it was something, it has nothing to do with you," another boy added. Their jealousy and pettiness over the imbalance of Fie's interactions with the maids made them less than welcoming of the supposedly guilty party.

Fie pouted. "What's your problem? Hmph, whatever!" she snapped. "C'mon, Queen, let's go!" Peeved at being left out, she flounced off back to his room.

"Okay," Queen said as he scrambled after her.

The boys glared in envy at their retreating figures. "Serves him right, that dirty trickster," one muttered.

"And the trickster's dog," another boy added.

Too bad for the other boys that the dirty trickster and the dog had the exact kind of relationship the rest of them so sorely longed for.

Once they were alone, Fie passed two of the chicken skewers to Queen. "Here's yours," she said.

"Thanks."

"I'm going to go find Gormus, Remie, and the rest of the guys to give them their shares, okay?"

"Sure. I'll see you when you get back." Queen accepted this readily enough and watched her go until she was out of sight. After all, once she got back, he knew they would be able to spend some quality alone time together.

In terms of how far along Fie and Queen were in a dating sense, they had (surprisingly) advanced to the kissing stage. At five months of dating, whether or not this moving quickly or slowly was a matter of individual interpretation, but Queen saw it as an enormous step in the right direction.

With nothing to do until Fie came back, Queen started reflecting on their first kiss. It had happened on a day three months after they first began dating, when Fie and Queen were hanging out in Queen's room like usual. Fie was reading a book she had borrowed from somewhere as Queen read over her shoulder, periodically sneaking little glances at Fie as he did so. Really, this secret relationship of theirs didn't have a lot of action in it, but the simple fact that he could date Fie and spend time with her like this made Queen happy anyway. This was enough for him.

Just as he thought that, Fie looked up and said, "Hey, Queen."

“Hmm?” Queen responded around a mouthful of tea. Had he a tail, he would have wagged it with all his might in sheer excitement at being spoken to.

Then Fie said, “You know, I’ve heard that you’re supposed to kiss your boyfriend once you’ve been going out with him for three months.”

Queen choked on the tea, coughing violently.

“Are you okay?” Fie asked.

Queen nodded wildly.

As if to kick the man when he was already down, Fie tilted her head to one side and asked, “So, do you want to give it a shot?”

She’d as good as walloped him across the face with a hammer. Kissing was a sensitive issue for Queen. Naturally, he wanted to tell her yes, and of course refusing was completely out of question. But he didn’t want to be pressured into it, and, more importantly, the mere thought of it sent his heart racing at an unbearable pace. Kissing Fie was one of his future goals, certainly, but on the same level as becoming a splendid knight, inheriting the family home from his parents, and supporting the household. He had never dreamed this would happen so soon! And a kiss right now? On an ordinary day while they were just hanging out together? Queen’s brain revved in anxious circles. If he’d had that tail, it would have been drooping between his legs right then.

“Wh-Where did you hear that from?” he stuttered. This wasn’t a yes or a no but more of a procrastination device. Pathetic, yes, but Queen was doing his best. At this point, it was all he could do to keep the conversation going.

Fie, completely unfazed, explained, “That’s what the book says,” as she showed Queen the cover of the book they were reading. *Romance for Dummies: Tired of Your Love Life Lagging Behind Everyone Else’s? Then Do We Have the Guidebook for You!* screamed the book cover in large letters.

Queen’s thoughts raced. *Leave me alone! Romance is different for everyone! I mean, what does a book know about my love life anyway? I mean—* But not a single word came out of his mouth. Despite the tea he had just swallowed, his throat was as dry as a bone.

Fie came up to his side. “Here, let’s give it a try,” she said. She closed her eyes

and tilted her head up towards him.

That's easy for her to say! Queen thought, the sheer sight of Fie's face in such close proximity making him flush a bright scarlet.

Her skin was luminescent, her eyelashes so faint. Hers was the cutest, most adorable face in all the world to Queen. And those lovely, pert, pale pink lips...

The sight of those lips in particular was a shock to his system. *She—she's going to kiss me...* The realization caused his entire body to break out in a nervous sweat.

As Queen stared, flabbergasted, Fie opened her bright blue eyes and blinked in surprise. She blinked several more times, making sure of how close they were before closing her eyes again. "Come on," she urged.

Easy for her to say! Queen thought again. It was like Queen's wildest dreams were coming true; at the same time, it was like he was in hell. His heart was pounding so fast, his cheeks were turning so red, and his embarrassment was shooting so far through the roof that he felt like he was going to die. He did not understand how they had ended up in this position.

But...

At the same time, his emotions were screaming, *Are you sure? Can I really?!* He very clearly wanted to try this. He took a huge gulp, straightened his spine without knowing why he was doing so, and slowly inched towards Fie. He moved closer to her face, so much paler than his own. As the distance between them shrunk, his heart thundered louder and louder.

Just as their faces were about to meet, he realized his nose was in danger of hitting hers and quickly tilted his head. Despite this being his first time at...well, just about every aspect of this scenario, he could tell this was a problem (perhaps out of pure instinct or perhaps because he had acted out this scenario in his head already). At any rate, with this first possible blunder avoided, he set his sights on his target once more and then jolted in surprise. She was so close! Her face was almost right under his nose. Well, not almost, Queen realized, as in his eagerness he had somewhat overshot and ended up a hair's breadth away from her. It was the first time he had ever been this close to her. Unable to stand being so near to her, he squeezed his eyes shut. Then, he realized this

was the proper way to kiss someone.

And then he began to panic. Now how was he supposed to know where to aim? How in the world did everyone else manage to figure this out? Yet there was no one around to tell him, as Fie was as much of a novice at this as he was. Oh, how he wished he had paid better attention to that book!

With his eyes closed, Queen's other senses became more attuned. He could hear Fie breathing in front of him. In his nervousness, his own breathing had paused. He stopped in his tracks, hearing nothing but Fie and seeing nothing but the darkness of his closed eyelids, and frantically wondered what he was supposed to do.

Meanwhile, Fie waited there motionlessly in front of him. In the midst of his panic, the simple solution of reopening his eyes didn't occur to him. There was no more time; he would run out of breath before much longer. (He should have breathed normally to begin with, and if he was worried about Fie's breathing, he could have simply backed off for a moment, but it was too late for that now.) Driven into a corner, Queen finally squared up with himself and took the plunge. *Oh well, what do I have to lose?* And with that battle cry ringing in his mind, thrust his face forward.

He felt a cool touch against his lips, the sensation of it stark. At that same moment, Fie made a little "mm" sound that told a completely different story from what he was used to hearing from her. Meanwhile, Queen was still panicking. *D-Did it work?!*

Since Queen's body temperature was higher than most other people's, Fie's skin always felt cool to the touch for him. It was noticeably different from any of his male friends' temperatures, so he thought of this as a girl's body heat, which always made his heart pound. Even before that, he had also noticed that when he touched her, her body had a softness to it—softer than Queen and his other friends at any rate, and he attributed that, too, to her being a girl.

Now, as his lips touched hers, he felt that same difference in temperature but also something else as well. He wasn't sure how to word it. Her lips felt smooth, even a little moist, but all the same fantastically, staggeringly soft.

But just then, he realized he didn't know if the part of Fie he was feeling was

actually her lips. Maybe he was convinced he was kissing her mouth but was actually touching a whole other part of her body! This worry consumed him, but he knew it would be so unbelievably lame of him to check that this was really Fie's mouth.

Yet as unsettled as he was, this sensation wasn't unpleasant. Kissing her was truly a delight. However, unable to withstand the nerves any longer (even if he felt this was cheating somewhat), Queen opened his eyes just a crack, so Fie wouldn't see, and snuck a peek downwards. Naturally, he couldn't see the part where his mouth was, but he did see Fie looking straight up at him as she kissed him back. And with that, he knew their first time was a success. This was his first kiss with Fie.

The excitement of this knowledge almost overwhelmed him. His face started to pale as he squeezed his eyes shut and resolutely focused on maintaining this position. He chanted to himself, *This! Is! My! First! Kiss! With! Fie!* Without any prior experience (naturally) or wealth of knowledge on the topic of kissing, this success felt like a coincidence. He would have expected them to bump noses in weird places or rush in too fast and smack their teeth against each other's. But luck was on his side in his first attempt. And now his mouth was on her, right there against Fie's lips.

His face was a brilliant crimson. Yes, he had called this first kiss a success, but three minutes had passed since that first "success." Queen figured that any kiss that extended that long might be pushing the definition of the word a bit. Yet with Fie so close he knew she could feel his body heat without even touching him, his mind wavered back and forth between pulling in closer or pushing away, leaving him frozen in indecision. Okay, yes, Queen had made a successful start, but he hadn't thought about what came afterwards. He hadn't considered beforehand when to back away, and nothing was coming to mind now as his brain drew an utter blank. He seemed ready to sit there stiffly, lips locked with hers, for the rest of his life.

Fie, realizing that Queen was not breathing, remained there until she figured he would be satisfied before her body fell away.

When she opened her eyes, she saw Queen's face a flaming red, although whether from embarrassment or lack of oxygen she couldn't say. Fie giggled a

little inappropriately at his shining, damp eyes. “Great job,” she said. “You tasted kind of like tea.” That sent Queen’s cheeks burning again.

And that was the whole story of Fie and Queen’s first kiss. After enough repetition, Queen had finally grown used to this kissing business, but deep down it still made his heart pound and his head reel, just as it had the first time. Even though the first kiss went smoothly, the second and third did result in bumped noses, and during the seventh, he wound up kissing another part of her face entirely. This show of his lack of experience made Fie giggle. It was only after the twentieth kiss or so that Queen felt they got the technique down and settled into a reliable method for it. That same feeling defined their relationship together as a whole.

Queen reflected on this pleasant (albeit embarrassing) memory as he waited for Fie. *I wonder if she’ll let me kiss her today*, he thought, with all the frankness of a boy his age, *but I’d be just as happy to let her kiss me*.

Just then, Fie returned and called, “Thanks for waiting!”

“Hi. Welcome back,” Queen said. Even this simple exchange filled him with happiness. The prospect of spending the rest of the day with Fie filled him with a happiness deep inside, even if his face didn’t show it. But that was okay. His enthusiasm was readily apparent to Fie.

Yet although she had just walked in, she suddenly said, “Ah! Whoops, sorry, there’s a meeting of the 18th platoon today!”

“Oh, I see...” Queen said. He was visibly disappointed. Yet he knew that Fie was happy to attend the meeting, so he felt like he was doing her a disservice.

“Once it’s over, I’ll come back so we can spend some time together,” she promised. “Okay?”

“S-Sure...” Queen said as his blush began to creep up his cheeks again. He watched her go, smiling softly on the inside.

For a squire in her second year of training, Fie was doing pretty well for herself. She was keeping up with her training, and she got along quite nicely with her friends. Sure, her wallet was a bit of a worrying factor, but she had

enough to get by until her next allowance came in. In terms of full-blown worries... Well, she couldn't think of any per se, but if pressed, she would admit that she still wasn't sure if she liked Queen romantically or not, even though they had been dating for five months now. The new experiences were fun in their own right, and she enjoyed seeing Queen so happy because of her, but she wasn't sure if that constituted liking him back. She knew Queen thought they liked one another as boyfriend and girlfriend, but she didn't feel like her feelings for him were any different from when they were just friends. It felt to her like Queen was someone she'd had a rocky start with before they reconciled and became great pals. That meant she wasn't sure about what feelings she really had for him.

She didn't truly understand why he wanted her so badly, why he cared for her so much, or why his face fell whenever she had to say goodbye to him. She wished she could feel the same way about him, but... Well, she knew she should figure out her own feelings, but everything was so unclear. This was why she tried to compensate as much as possible by being proactive and seeking out information about these couple milestones. Whenever she put the information to good use, Queen was delighted. But she didn't understand that either.

Lost in thought, she arrived at the 18th platoon's guardhouse and found Conrad in his usual position, waiting for her and brewing a pot of tea while disguised as a beautiful woman.

"Welcome, my dear," he called to her.

"Hi, Conrad," she said.

As she slid into her usual seat, Conrad set a cup of tea and a tea cake down on the table in front of her.

Garuge was here today too. He had his own private workshop here in the castle from where he made all the weapons and various gadgets the 18th platoon used. Fie popped in to see him for that purpose every once in a while. Granted, she also had been known to show up at the workshop just to hang out or propose an idea for a new tool for playing pranks with. Whenever she used those tools to cause a ruckus, Parwick, another member of the 18th, inevitably told off both of them. It made for a pretty odd sight to see Parwick lecturing

both Garuge, who at almost fifty was the oldest in the platoon, and Fie, who was the youngest.

Garuge now beamed at Fie, pleased to see her starting her second year of training. “Look at you, lad!” he cried. “Now that you’re in your second year of training, I reckon you’ve grown up a bit.”

“Do you really think so?” Fie cried in excitement. As a matter of fact, she had thought the same thing! She thought she had grown, little by little, as she progressed through her first year as a squire. Wasn’t it about time for her to become a cool, older knight? When she looked in the mirror, she felt like the look in her eyes was just about as awesome as Sir Crow’s when he was at his most serious. Now she tried striking her coolest pose as she contemplated the matter.

“I was kidding.” Garuge cackled. “You haven’t changed a bit!”

Fie deflated and whined, “Aww... You got my hopes up...”

Orbel responded by writing on his paper, “That’s not true at all. You have made growth.”

Fie’s eyes shone in excitement. “Really? How? How have I grown?” she pressed.

Orbel made a troubled expression. Even with all the time in the world to think, he wasn’t sure how to respond to this... “No comment,” he wrote.

“You’re so mean!” cried Fie.

He wrote back, “Sorry!” with an apologetic expression.

Conrad chuckled. “Well, that’s just the way life is sometimes,” he explained.

“That’s right,” said Garuge. “It’s good to be young.”

“But come on!” Fie wailed. “I have to have grown *somehow*!” She paused. “I can’t think of any good examples, but somehow!”

Just then, the door opened and Crow stepped in to witness all of the ruckus. “Heath, what are you yelling about this time?” he asked, amused. He was supposed to be an adult, but his smirk would have looked more at home on the face of an insolent child.

Fie looked up at him and begged, “Sir Crow, now that I’m in my second year of squire training, don’t you think I’ve grown up?”

For a brief moment, something hilarious seemed to cross Crow’s mind before he composed himself once more. He looked at her and almost sounded surprised as he said, “Hmm. Now that you mention it, let me see.” He looked at her from several angles and murmured to himself in contemplation, occasionally interspersing it with little “I see!”s for Fie’s benefit.

Fie reddened, nervous about the lengths of this evaluation, and fixed her posture as she waited for the results of the assessment. With one final “Hmm, I see,” Crow nodded deeply. Fie stared back at him impatiently. Then he rudely smirked, taunted—“Nope, you’re exactly the same!”—and burst into raucous laughter.

Fie immediately realized she was being made fun of and just as quickly retaliated by chucking a wooden practice sword at Crow, before laying into him and throwing anything she could get her hands on. She was really going at it.

“Ow, ow!” Crow yelped. “Hey, stop, this isn’t funny anymore! Stop, I’m serious!” Having run out of suitable objects on hand, Fie’s choice of projectiles now devolved into things that probably shouldn’t be thrown as a joke. It was all Crow could do to withstand the onslaught. Why, he wondered, was no one coming to his rescue? Had he somehow brought this upon himself?

But just then, the voice of Crow’s potential rescuer rang from the doorway, “What is going on in here? What is all this noise?”

“Captain!” Fie cried. It was her favorite captain!

Fie broke away from Crow, who lay cowering in pain, and hurried to Yore with tears in her eyes. “Sir Crow is being mean to me,” she informed the captain. “He says I haven’t grown at all!”

Yore, otherwise known as King Roy of Orstoll, bequeathed Fie with a smile rarely witnessed by almost anyone else. “That’s not true,” he said. “You are making progress, Heath. Since we first met, you’ve improved your time in the long-distance race by five minutes and shortened your sprint times by two seconds as well. You’ve also grown almost two millimeters taller. Plus, your test score averages have increased by twenty percent, and I hear you’ve already

learned over ten techniques from Cain. That's solid growth."

Fie had to wonder how he had managed to learn such fine levels of detail about her, but all the same, she stared up at him with glistening eyes.

"I knew it!" she breathed. "You're incredible. You've been watching me this whole time!"

"Of course," he said. "I'm always looking out for you."

Crow, trapped under the pile of things Fie had thrown at him, felt rather left out from Yore and Fie's heartwarming bonding moment. "Bah!" he muttered. "Here I am, watching over Heath every single day, and this is the thanks I get?"

Conrad covered his mouth and tittered. "That's called just deserts," he snickered.



Even though Fie and her classmates were now in their second year of training, the training itself hadn't changed markedly. Just as before, after their official knight training was over for the day, the squires lingered in the training grounds for what was officially called "voluntary extra practice" but was actually just an opportunity to chat.

"See," one boy put in, "I'm thinking that now that we're second-year squires, it's about time that we'll start wanting finishing moves."

"Yeah, good point," another agreed. "We're mature enough that they're basically a necessity at this point."

"No arguing that. We're getting stronger every day, after all."

Remie heard this conversation and remembered hearing one just like it once before. He was sure he wasn't imagining the similarities. For all the boys were claiming they were grown-up now, here they were returning to the exact same ideas, like a hamster running in a wheel. Remie broke out into a cold sweat as he wondered if this would end well.

Despite Remie's worries, the boys continued to talk about these finishing moves. "But see," said the first boy, "when it comes to finishing moves, you don't want to just latch onto the first one you come across. This time, let's all take our time and think about what finishing moves we really want."

"That's a smart idea," said the second boy. "Just goes to show that we're second-years! You'd never see any first-years thinking of stuff like that."

Whether or not this was truly a smart idea, each boy began sharing what he considered to be a crucial component of a finishing move.

"Finishing moves need to be powerful, and that's that," one boy said.

"Absolutely," said another. "No arguing that."

A third boy put in, "Finishing moves need to be cool, or there's no point at all."

"Exactly. No arguing that either."

Suddenly, the owner of a high-pitched voice raised their hand and joined in the conversation with an “Ooh, ooh, I know!” Of course, that was Fie.

The boys turned to look at her sternly, their minds already made up even before she spoke. One of them said, “Okay, Heath, what is it now?”

“How about if you dip your sword in poi—?”

“Come off it already,” one of the boys interrupted.

“That doesn’t count as a finishing move,” another pointed out. “Give it a rest, Heath.”

Fie glared. “Hmph!” she snapped. “But if someone’s poisoned, they’re pretty darn finished, don’t you think?” After the good response she had received to all her efforts in this past year, she didn’t understand what led the other squires to treat her so coldly now.

“It’s been a whole year, and you haven’t managed to make a single bit of progress,” the first boy explained. “No, wait, I take that back. You used to be able to understand the subtle details of these squirely things better. That means you’ve actually regressed.”

“You’re the black sheep of the north dorm,” the second boy continued. “And we still haven’t forgotten that you were responsible for the crime of treating our manly dreams as toys.”

“You need to learn through our meetings what it takes to be a squire.”

“Oh, true. No arguing that.”

“Right. No arguing that at all.”

Stripped of her right to speak, Fie puffed her cheeks in anger. How was her idea of a finishing move so different from those of the rest of her class? Maybe it was because she was a girl, versus all of these boys, or it might have been a matter of the difference in how their platoons operated or even her individual way of thinking. But to Fie’s mind, this had to do with how childish the boys were, even now. That meant the difference in these attitudes was down to a difference in maturity. Naturally, if one wanted to finish another off, poison certainly fit the bill!

The unfairness of being unable to get a word in edgewise made Fie seethe in anger. Next to her, Queen, who hadn't been paying much attention and so was quite excited to join in this topic, raised his hand.

"Oh, Queen!" the first squire cried. "It's rare to see you join in these discussions! Do you have a finishing move in mind?"

"C'mon, let us have it!" the second cheered.

Queen had transferred to the north dorm partway through the year and had missed the first finishing move craze. He was, when it really came down to it, a boy at heart. Sure, he was normally more reserved, but he loved finishing moves and other similar things.

Once given the permission to speak, Queen stood up but didn't say a word. Instead, he made several sweeping gestures to indicate his vision of the ideal finishing move. It would have been challenging to put those gestures into words, but they were, by all accounts, truly impressive gestures.

His movements excited the boys terribly. "Oh, I get it!" one squire exclaimed.

"That's awesome, Queen!" another of his friends chimed in.

"Impressive! That's it! The perfect finishing move we've all been searching for!"

"Yup, no arguing that."

Queen smiled bashfully, completely unaware of Fie at his side glowering at him.

A squire who hadn't been participating in this conversation saw the crowd of boys and called, "Hey, since you're all hanging around, come take these to storage, will you?" He pointed to a handcart piled high with all their practice swords before heading back to the dormitory.

The one tasked with this duty turned out to be—

"Heath, take care of that, would you?"

"Yeah, we're on a quest for the right finishing move!"

"You're the only one not doing anything. Take care of it!"

And thus, the duty was foisted upon her. The boys expected her to raise a complaint, but much to their surprise, she set off for the cart readily enough.

“I’m surprised he’s actually doing it,” one of the boys said as he watched Fie go.

“Maybe he realized he’s out of his depth after listening to our high-level conversation.”

Fie reached the cart. The minute she touched it, she immediately spun it around and zoomed back to the boys.

“Here’s my finishing blow!” she screamed. “Cart attack!”

“Huh?!”

“Oh no! Run!” her classmate wailed.

Fie used the cart’s speed to bear down on the boys with uncharacteristic quickness.

“Oh crap! He’s gaining on us!” one of them yelped.

“But look!” a different squire cried. “That’s a perfect finishing move!”

“You understand now! This is the embodiment of the finishing moves we’ve been seeking!”

“You understand how we feel now! Hurray!”

“All our chewing you out finally paid off!”

“Yup, no arguing that!”

“Now take in all this manly energy, Heath, and unleash it by letting us go!”

Fie doubled down and roared again, “Finishing move: Cart attaaaaaack!”

Ultimately, Fie did not let her classmates go, but thanks to the cart attack, the cart was very much taken care of.

A week later, after the usual 18th platoon meeting, Captain Yore called Fie over to chat. These chats usually consisted of him asking how her life was going and offering a few words of advice. Granted, he had also been known to

reprimand her whenever one of her pranks went a bit too far, but truth be told, Fie didn't really mind that either. She enjoyed talking with him regardless.

"Did you hear, Heath, that a circus is coming to town?" he asked. "If you'd like to go, I can release you from your duties for the 18th on that day."

This puzzled Fie. "What's a...circus?" she asked. She didn't recognize the word.

Crow butted in. "You don't know what a circus is? All right, listen up. Circuses have all kinds of stuff." He launched into an explanation. "There are lions and elephants that do tricks. If you don't know what those are either, they're these huge animals, ten times as big as we are. And then there's a flying trapeze that goes way up in the air, all the way to the castle's third floor, and a whole crew of men and women perform on it. And they also suspend a rope super high up and walk across it, with no safety wires or anything. Circuses have lots of other things too, like—"

Fie's eyes sparkled at the description. Unable to hide her excitement, she bounced in place, cheeks glowing. "I want to go see the circus!" she cried.

"If I have the time, I'll take you," Crow offered. "Oh, wait, I just remembered—I'll probably be covered in girls begging for the chance to go with me. It's because I'm so popular, you know? Sorry, you'll have to excuse me."

"Uh-huh. Sure," Fie deadpanned. She ignored Crow's usual skirt-chaser boasting and turned to Yore. "Captain, will you come with me?" If possible, she wanted to go with the whole platoon.

"I apologize," he said, "but I will likely have important work to attend to on that day."

Fie looked downcast. "Oh, I see..." she mumbled.

"I apologize," he repeated.

"It's fine," she said. She shook her head, waving off his apology. She could probably get Crow to come with her after all, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to invite Queen and the gang. Fie was never lonely these days. She knew that, somehow or other, Crow would end up choosing her over any of his girlfriends.

Seeing Fie looking at him, Crow thumbed his chin and flashed his dazzling whites at her. “What’s wrong?” he said. “Cat got your tongue? I’m just too cool? Sorry for being so handsome.” Yeah, Fie thought, great guy, except for that Casanova act.

A week later, in the break after history class, a squire ran up to Fie and the others calling, “Hey! Did you hear the news?”

“What is it?” Fie asked.

“Let me guess,” said one of her friends. “The baby swallows in the west warehouse have grown up and left the nest?”

“Oh, I know—I saw that the spotted dog on Third Street had puppies.”

The boy with the news shook his head. “Nope!” he said, addressing them with a self-satisfied grin. “Believe it or not, the circus is coming to town!”

“What?! The circus?”

“No way!”

“Ooh!”

The mere word spawned massive excitement. No matter what kind, a circus was a circus! The legendary Bruce M’chouchouteman, he who subdued the mysterious Mini Giant Wishy of Loch Wis, dominated the boys’ lists of things they wanted to see at a circus.

“I hear that the flying trapeze is totally epic!”

“Nah, the knife throwing act is the coolest.”

“It can’t be cooler than the lions!”

“Wait, what’s a lion?”

“It’s like a giant cat.”

“What’s so cool about that? There’s a mean old cat in the fishing district named Barbaros who’s about as big as a dog.”

“You dummy, I don’t mean like that! Lions are even bigger than Orstoll bears.”

“Wait, what?! That’s crazy cool!”

“Are they strong? I bet they are!”

“Yeah, people say the lion is the king of the jungle!”

The squires grew more and more animated. In the midst of all the hubbub, Gormus noticed Heath was being uncharacteristically quiet. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “I figured you’d be the one leading all this ruckus.”

“Actually, I already knew all about this,” she bragged with a self-important chuckle.

Every circus needed special authorization in order to enter Wienne. This permitting process had strict criteria, so not many troupes were successful. This made the times when a circus did arrive an even bigger deal. Right now, the circus was approved but their paperwork was still being processed, and there was still time before they would be able to make the official announcement. Fie was a special case in that she got to hear about it early from Captain Yore. That whole week, Fie hadn’t been able to tell anyone about it no matter how much she wanted to. Every night before bed, she daydreamed about what the circus would be like when she finally got to see it. Now, a week later, her excitement was still as strong as it ever was.

Unable to hide it any longer, Fie jumped up and down and yelled at Queen and her friends, “I want to go see it! Let’s all go together!”

She looked adorable like that, Queen thought. He nodded. (He had actually seen this particular circus already, but he decided he’d better leave that a secret.) “You too, Gormus!” Fie yelled. “Come on!”

“Fine, whatever you say,” Gormus said. He acted like he was doing Fie a favor, but he nodded too. She must have been playing it cool before, just so she could rub her advance knowledge in their faces, he thought.

Meanwhile, the other boys continued their eager discussion.

“I hear the lion jumps through a flaming hoop.”

“Really?! A flaming hoop? I had no idea any animal could do that!”

“It must be the strongest animal alive!”

“Hey, so when’s this circus going to get here?”

“In two months, I heard.”

“I can’t wait that long!” The squires couldn’t restrain themselves, all the boys itching with anticipation.

Then one of the boys remembered something. “That reminds me,” he said. “I have no idea what it’s for, but there’s a hoop in the west warehouse.”

“That’s it!” Fie cried.

Queen didn’t know what *it* was, but he had an awful feeling about where this was going. He watched in horror as Fie launched herself into the boys’ conversation, her eyes sparkling in excitement.

Chapter 26 — An Unexpected Parting of Ways

The chancellor of Orstoll was not a well-known man due to King Roy and the activities of the knights taking up most of the public's attention. However, his reliable working habits earned him the trust of the various state officials, foremost among them King Roy himself.

The chancellor of Orstoll, Zorace, was the former king's younger brother. This former king was Roy's father, which made Zorace Roy's uncle. Roy's mother passed away before he was old enough to understand what was happening, and after his father died, Roy assumed the throne with Zorace as his only living relative. At the time, Zorace had been exiled to roam other countries on the decree of Roy's grandfather, as an apparent effort to avoid a succession struggle. Roy's father despised Zorace's constant remonstrations and advice and as such did not lift the order, but when Roy took the throne, Zorace was finally called home to Orstoll. Zorace had spent many decades moving from land to land as a guest, which imbued him with a detailed knowledge of many foreign kingdoms and strong connections to the people within them. Leveraging his background, Zorace was a boon to Orstoll in both domestic and international affairs alike.

This month's diplomatic work had kept Zorace away once more, but now he had finally returned home. The soldier guarding the castle gate saw the returning chancellor and bowed nervously. "L-Lord Chancellor, welcome home," he stammered.

All the chancellor said in response was, "Carry on with your work," as he swept past the guard into the castle.

In one of the castle corridors, a group of maids had just finished cleaning for the day. "Now that our work is done," one of the maids said, "let's go home."

"Ooh, yes! And did you know that the accessory shop on Kohlen Lane is having a bargain sale?" one of her companions added. "I have to hurry and check it out!"

“Really? Oh my gosh, I’m coming too!” said a third.

Just then, Zorace called, “Hold on,” to the chatting maidservants, stopping them in their tracks. They turned around to see who was calling them, their dismay obvious upon recognizing him.

“L-Lord Chancellor...” the maids stammered.

Giving no heed to their reaction, Zorace matter-of-factly pointed to a corner of the corridor. “There is still dust in that corner. It is your duty to clean this castle, and you should attend to your duties properly.”

He was right; there was an inconspicuous, but still very much present, pile of dust in the corner. The maids had noticed it but, in their rush to go home, decided to leave it for another day.

“Y-Yes, Lord Chancellor,” the maids responded and rushed to clean the spot he had indicated.

One of the maids grumbled, “I’m sure it’s fine. We clean this place every day.”

“Shh, he can hear you!” her companion hissed.

“All I’m saying,” she continued, “is that if we have to get told off, I would rather it be by someone handsome like King Roy, not some stuffy old man always skulking around the place and nitpicking everything.”

Zorace could, in fact, hear this too. This level of disrespect could easily be deserving of punishment, but Zorace acted as if he had not heard them at all and made to leave. Instead, an intense male voice came from behind the maids and began rebuking them. “Our nation depends on those responsible for it carrying out their duties to the letter. If the guardsmen were to give up and say, ‘That’s enough work for the day,’ they run the risk of letting interlopers past our borders. Your duty, as maidservants, is to keep this palace clean. Rather than voice your discontent when criticisms are made about your work, shouldn’t you use this as an opportunity to self-reflect and grow?”

The maids spun about in amazement. “Y-Your Majesty...” they breathed.

Faced with the daunting aura of the king, the maid who had wanted to be told off by King Roy blanched. “M-My apologies, Your Majesty,” she said, frantically

bowing.

“If anyone deserves an apology, it’s the chancellor,” he said.

At this prompting, the maid bowed to Zorace as well. “My apologies, Lord Chancellor.” Then with tears welling in her eyes, she set about to redo the cleaning as if her life depended on it.

Meanwhile, Roy and Zorace departed. Once they were alone, Zorace said, “Might I ask what Your Majesty is doing here?” At this time of day, Roy was supposed to be in his office. Zorace had planned on visiting said office to report the favorable outcome of his diplomatic mission, but he hadn’t expected to find the king wandering the halls.

“When I heard my lord uncle had returned, I came out to greet him,” Roy said.

Zorace’s eyebrows bunched together as he frowned. He had advised Roy on this very subject any number of times. “I am repeating myself yet again, but I am merely Your Majesty’s loyal subject,” he said. “There is no need for you to come meet me. If you have need of me, all you need do is summon me, and I shall come to you.”

Yet no matter how many times Zorace pressed this issue, Roy remained stubborn. “No,” Roy insisted, “as my lord uncle, you deserve my respect.” Nonchalantly, he continued, “But on another note, shouldn’t that utter disrespect you just faced anger you?”

Roy was by nature not an expressive man. However, Zorace noticed a small wrinkle in the king’s brow, which surprised him. He asked, “Are you angry?”

“Is there any man who can hear his family being disparaged without anger?”

To this, Zorace had no answer. Avoiding both of these questions, Zorace sighed and said, “Do please remember that you are the king and act accordingly.” This, too, was an oft-repeated piece of advice.

From here the two discussed various affairs of state, such as the diplomatic mission and assorted domestic issues before they parted ways. “You must be tired after your long travels. Take a rest now,” Roy told Zorace.

In order to kill time, if nothing else, Zorace began walking about the palace. The nervous faces of patrolling watchmen and servants at work glancing back at him only exhausted him further, so he left the palace to walk the grounds instead. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the consort's chambers where Princess Fie lived and averted his eyes. He quickly set off in a different direction.

As he approached one of the dorms where the squires lived and worked, he heard a rowdy clamor of voices.

"Oooh! Can you really do it, Heath?"

"Go for it! If anyone can pull it off, it's you!"

Zorace knitted his eyebrows together at the cacophony. Oh, boys. They were still of the age for shouting and mayhem, but he felt that this was just a tad too loud. What in the world was going on in there? He set off for the north dorm to give them a good, brief talking-to.

"Come on! You've got this!" one boy shouted.

"You can do it, Heath! Go, go, go!" another joined in.

"You're the pride of the north dorm!"

Raucous cheering rose from the clearing in front of the dorm. Cheerfully, Fie threw her hands in the air and declared, "I can do this!" The audience of watching boys, overcome with emotion, roared with passion as hot tears streamed down their cheeks. Queen, flustered and white as a sheet, was the one exception.

There stood in front of Fie a blazing ring of fire.

Thinking of their own safety, Fie and the other squires hadn't planned to include fire initially. In order to quench their excitement for the still-approaching circus, the boys had set up a hoop about one meter off the ground that they took turns leaping through (or failing to do so), roaring with joy as they imagined the hoop consumed with flame. In the midst of all this, one squire revealed they possessed an extraordinary aptitude for this feat. This was none other than Fie. Her natural flexibility and small stature allowed her to leap through the hoop with plenty of room to spare. Eventually, this escalated, Fie flashing a peace sign as she leaped through backwards, added a spin, and threw

in a triple flip for good measure, all with a smug grin on her face. She was like a prodigy, a hoop-leaping prodigy. The boys did not fail to grasp the implications of her blossoming new talent. This meant that she could do the real thing—she could leap through a real flaming hoop! That led to Fie, who was very much cognizant of her new skill, declaring, “I bet I can do it!” And thus set the stage for the current shenanigans.

As the hoop burned above her, Fie crouched in a starting position, preparing to spring.

“Heath, stop! It’s dangerous,” Queen pleaded, his face deathly pale.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I can do it!”

Her eyes were focused straight ahead. She believed she could make it through the hoop as surely as birds could fly. Fie was unstoppable. She was undeniably the sole thing on everyone’s minds. Back when she lived as a princess, she always lurked on the edge of public perception, which Fie, as someone who thrived on social recognition, found unbearable. This emotional scar from her childhood ran surprisingly deep. Now that she had this chance, she wasn’t about to let it slip away.

Queen fretted over what he would do if Fie hurt herself. She was a girl! What if she permanently burned her face? ...Well, it wasn’t like he only cared about her for her face. Besides, he would think Fie’s face adorable no matter what happened to it. His thoughts ran in muddled circles. He wondered if he should try to hug Fie to stop her, but for a teenage boy like Queen, hugging Fie was already quite a challenge in its own right. Giving her a hug required a lot of mental preparation on his part. Even after they began dating, Fie was the one who initiated all their touches and intimate moments. For an inexperienced late bloomer like Queen, conundrums like this were simply out of his depth.

Just then, Fie yelled, “Here I go!” and dashed off the starting block. There she went, Fie, smallest of all the squires, pelting with determination towards the fiery hoop.

Yet, the same exact moment as she leaped into the air, a voice startled the boys, yelling, “What do you think you’re doing?!”

In one glorious movement, Fie twisted through the center of the hoop

without brushing any of the flames. The chancellor's eyes widened at the sight.

"Uh-oh, it's the chancellor..." one of the squires murmured.

Another added, "That's not good..."

The chancellor had a reputation among the squires for being strict. It wasn't as sour of an impression of him as the maids had; sure, he had told off a couple of the boys for horseplay, but all in all, everyone agreed that was pretty fair and reasonable. Still, there was one person in this group who was definitely going to come out of this the worst.

Panicked, the chancellor rushed up to Fie and shouted, "Are you all right?"

Fie tumbled to the ground safely, sprang up, and flashed a peace sign to the crowd. "I did it, everybody!" she called. In her concentration, she hadn't even noticed the chancellor. This was probably a good thing—he might have startled her and caused her to lose her balance—but now she had no idea why everyone looked so worried.

She was confused. "Huh?" Realizing something was up, she looked over and saw a middle-aged man she didn't recognize running up to her. He was looking right at her, his eyes as wide as saucers in petrified horror. She could tell he wasn't a knight, or anyone related to the knights, but he looked kind of like a government official. Judging by the boys' reactions, she realized, *Oh, shoot, I'm in for it now.*

The boys rushed to Fie's aid before she could be told off. "I'm sorry, Lord Chancellor," one wailed. "We started this! We made him do it."

"No, it's my fault!" another confessed. "I was the one who found the hoop."

"And I helped set it up," a third squire added.

"Um, I mean..." Fie admitted, "I did say that I would, you know..." She was well aware she had the bad habit of knowing something was dangerous but rushing into it anyway just to get attention.

However, for some reason, the man didn't move, staring fixedly at Fie's face.

She knew who Orstoll's chancellor was through hearsay. People said he was strict, but this was her first time actually meeting him. Stern wrinkles lined his

face, yet Fie thought there was a kindness in him as well. She couldn't explain why, but she felt oddly fond looking at him. She tilted her head, puzzling over this strange sensation.

The man remained frozen to the spot throughout all of this until, dumbfounded, he finally opened his mouth and said, "Your Highness Princess Fie, what in the world are you doing here...?"

This baffled the boys. They knew who Princess Fie was. She was infamous for having an illicit love affair with King Roy and forcing her way into Orstoll by becoming his second wife. She was now supposed to be shut up in her own consort's chambers in a corner of the castle, but apart from that, who knew what had happened to her. Come to think of it, the boys couldn't recall hearing any fresh rumors about her lately; she had blended into the background of their collective consciousness.

Yet right now, the only people here were the squires, who all recognized one another and were friends with each other. There was no one like the rumored Princess Fie here whatsoever. Therefore, the boys were completely stumped when they heard the chancellor address one of their number as Princess Fie.

However, Fie's reaction was different. Her mind raced. How did this man know who she really was? Furthermore, how had he seen through her with a single glance? It shouldn't have been possible! The only people in Orstoll who knew her true identity were her sister Queen Fielle, the maid Lynette, and her former chef Biffe. Maybe, she thought, it was possible she misheard him saying something else as "Princess Fie." She couldn't believe this was happening otherwise.

However, the chancellor finally returned to his senses and repeated "Princess Fie" quite clearly. "Your Highness Princess Fie, what are you doing in a place like this? Why are you jumping through a flaming hoop, of all things?" No doubt about it, the chancellor knew with conviction that she was the princess.

Fie turned rigid. She had never expected this to happen! *What do I do, what do I do?* she thought. Her mind was a blank, gaping hole where thoughts should have been. She couldn't deny that this was a product of her own carelessness, but she wanted to think this through. Even though it was possible for someone

to find out that Heath was secretly a girl, the chances of someone finding out Heath was secretly Princess Fie were so low that Fie had barely considered the possibility at all. After all, practically no one in the entire kingdom had even seen Princess Fie before... and yet some complete stranger recognized Fie immediately.

“Please explain yourself, Your Highness,” the chancellor said. It finally dawned on the boys that something wasn’t right. The chancellor was ignoring the rest of them and only talking to Heath; furthermore, for some strange reason, he kept calling Heath “Princess Fie.” This made no sense whatsoever, but Heath looked like he was in trouble, so the boys stepped in front of him to protect him from the chancellor.

“Lord Chancellor, sir,” said one boy, “you keep calling him ‘Princess Fie,’ but he’s not the princess. I mean, in the first place, he’s a boy after all.”

“That’s Heath,” another one put in helpfully. “He’s a squire like us.”

“That’s right,” said a third. “He’s been living with us for a whole year, ever since we all became squires, so we can’t be wrong.”

The boys were attempting to clear up the misunderstanding but, Fie realized, couldn’t help but be the ones who had made a misunderstanding themselves!

The chancellor’s eyes widened in shock. “You mean to say she has lived and trained as a squire for an entire year? What is the meaning of this, Your Highness?” Despite the squire’s claims that Fie was a different person altogether, the chancellor refused to let his conviction be swayed.

Fie groaned internally. She had no idea why he was so confident that she really was Princess Fie, but she had no choice but to try and fool him.

“Th-They’re right,” she stammered. “My name’s Heath. I’m not a princess or anything. What, do we look that similar? Man, talk about a coincidence, am I right?” She forced herself to laugh as she desperately tried to conceal her trembling.

The boys nodded. To them, she was just Heath, the great friend they had studied with and goofed off with for a whole year now. The chancellor had to be mistaken.

The chancellor looked at Fie like she was a child telling a fib to get out of trouble, and then sighed. "Very well," he said. "I understand. Then I shall have to report this to His Majesty the King and his wife. As she is your younger sister, Her Majesty Queen Fielle should surely be able to tell if you are the princess."

"Please do," the boys replied, confident in their knowledge that this really was Heath. "Then you'll see that this is all a big misunderstanding!"

The chancellor turned on his heel to return to the castle and report this incident to the royal family. But suddenly, Fie's trembling hand caught his sleeve and gripped it tightly, stopping him in his tracks. he was by no means strong enough to stop anyone with brute force alone, but her hold stayed him anyway. She stood there without saying a word, her eyes downcast.



Murmurs of “H-Heath...?” leaked out from the bewildered crowd of boys around her.

Fie did not answer them. If she let this continue to run its course, soon everyone would know she was actually Princess Fie. Yet there was nothing she could do to stop this. If only she had explained everything to Fielle... As her confidence grew throughout her year as a squire, she had started to think that pretty soon it would be the right time to tell her sister the truth. But thinking about it practically, even if Fielle lied for her, she doubted the chancellor would accept it.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Heath?” one of the boys asked.

Another one chuckled nervously. “Maybe he’s scared of being reported to the king...?”

“Yeah, it’s scary to be told on to the king, for sure. But won’t that prove you’re right?”

“Hey, come on, Heath...”

Fie said nothing in response. Tears began to well up in her eyes.

Perhaps expecting this response from her, the chancellor turned back to her and said, “Your Highness—no, excuse me, you’re married now. Your Majesty, then. We must get to the bottom of this.” Fie’s hand on his sleeve slackened and drooped. The chancellor led her away as the remaining boys broke out into wild speculating.

“There’s no way, right? Is Heath really Princess Fie?”

“But people say Princess Fie is mean and ugly. Heath’s the complete opposite! I mean, sure, he’s a complete troublemaker, but still!”

“Is this for real...?”

“I dunno. But I mean, from the way he was acting...”

“Wait a minute, does that mean he was a girl all along?”

“I guess...”

“If I’m going to be honest, I’ve looked at him before and thought, ‘Dang, if he

were a girl, I'd be into that.'"

"Yeah, his face is definitely on the cuter side..."

Queen was as white as a sheet. Fie was in trouble! He had to help her! He had to... Queen panicked, but amid his turmoil, found that he could do nothing. Classic Queen.

That was when the boys finally remembered him. He was always tripping around at Fie's heels, so that meant he must have known something was up.

"Queen, did you know anything about this?"

"Yeah, anything weird?"

Queen felt like digging his own grave right about now. "I-In terms of weird..." he mumbled. "We... well, um, we..." Queen wore his heart on his sleeve far more than Fie ever did. If he tried to lie, there was a hundred percent chance the others would catch on. If he stayed silent, there was still a ninety percent chance that they'd find out. His blushing and trembling alone confirmed the boys' suspicions.

"Wait, don't tell me... Were you...?" one of them asked.

"Were you dating...?"

"Um, no, I mean...um..." Sweat poured down Queen's bright red face.

The boys were astonished. "No way..." they breathed.

Now, no matter how much time passed, the image they had of the person they knew as Heath would never appear before them again.

Chapter 27 — Handling Fie's Case

The chancellor led Fie into the castle and guided her into an antechamber. "Wait here, please," he told her. "I will go call for the king."

The antechamber was made up with a neat little couch and table, but to Fie, it felt like a jail cell. *What's going to happen to me?* she thought. Left alone here to think, she understood that no matter what happened, she would be returned to her consort's chambers once more. But no, she had escaped once before, so perhaps this time her living quarters would be even more cruel. Maybe she truly *would* be confined to a jail cell. This was the end of her great escape and the death of her chance at walking a second path in life as a squire.

Fie hugged her knees to herself as she sat on the couch. She mourned the return of her former life of solitude and no future prospects, but more than anything, she mourned not being able to see Captain Yore, Crow, the rest of her platoon, Queen, Gormus, and every single one of her fellow squires ever again. In a single year, Fie's life, which had once only had her sister and Lynette in it, was colored with whole heaps of wonderful people she felt close to.

The sound of footsteps and three people talking back and forth reached Fie's ears as she sat slumped over.

"The princess Fie has escaped? What is the meaning of this, uncle?" one voice said.

"That is what I hoped to ask, Your Majesty," another replied. "It is not my place, so I shall refrain from chastising you, but what in the world were you doing to let it come to this?"

"I mean, you ordered for any problems to be reported to you, right?" said a third voice.

"That I did," said the second. "And no news is good news in my book, uncle. More importantly, is this really so pressing?"

"Absolutely, Your Majesty. She is your lady wife. Now do please come this

way. She is waiting for you in this room.”

“Seriously? This has to be the first time you’ve met her, huh?”

“It is.”

“My goodness, what in the world have you been doing? Your Majesty, you are giving me a headache.”

Upon hearing the last two voices, Fie flew up from the sofa. She recognized who they belonged to, and not only that, but these people were also the two she respected most: her captain and Sir Crow.

The moment the door opened, Fie launched herself at both of them. “Captain! Sir Crow!” she wailed. King Roy and Crow jolted as a sobbing Heath hurtled into them.

“Huh? What’s Heath doing here?” Crow asked.

“What’s wrong? Why are you crying?” said Roy with concern.

The chancellor looked utterly done with all of them. “Well, it appears you are already all acquainted with one another. This young lady, Your Majesty, is your lady wife, Her Royal Majesty Princess Fie.”

“Huh?” said Crow.

“What are you talking about?” Roy asked.

Fie fidgeted self-consciously under their flabbergasted stares. She and the chancellor, followed by the other two, sat down on the couch. Fie felt too awkward in the wake of her secret being revealed to say anything, and Crow and Roy were too surprised to speak.

Only the chancellor spoke with perfect ease. “First, I believe Her Majesty has a duty to explain herself.”

Fie glanced at Crow and Roy. She guessed she really did have no choice but to tell them everything and so, as they were her two most trusted people in all the world, she told them her life story.



Fie was always treated coldly in her homeland, and her father had decided to take advantage of her sister's wedding to dump her on Orstoll. The moment she arrived, she was shut up in the consort's chambers. Then, on the day her cook decided to quit, she saw a pamphlet advertising the upcoming squire admission tests and decided to break out of her confines. So that no one would find out, she did the best she could without any food of her own. Then she met Crow, was accepted into the squires thanks to Captain Yore, and the rest was history.

Once she finished talking, Crow put his head in his hands and groaned. "I thought you were a child of illegal immigrants, but it turns out you were nobility all along."

Roy, on the other hand, suddenly bowed to her. "My apologies!"

Fie was stunned. "Huh? Why are you apologizing? It's not your fault! The only people who wronged me were my parents and... well, I probably shouldn't say this since you're his sworn man, but the king of Orstoll." She wasn't sure if she should bad-mouth his boss right in front of him, but she couldn't deny that it was the king's fault.

The chancellor sighed. "Do take a closer look," he said, indicating Captain Yore. "Do you not notice anything?"

Fie tilted her head in confusion. See, now that he mentioned it, something didn't add up. The chancellor had said he was bringing her to see His Majesty the King, so what were Captain Yore and Sir Crow doing here? Also, this was the first time she had seen the captain without his mask, but she felt like she had seen him somewhere before. She knew he was Captain Yore the moment she had heard his voice, but—well, Crow was pretty good-looking, but he couldn't hold a candle to Captain Yore. She *definitely* would have remembered seeing someone this dreamy.

"The fact that she cannot even recognize you speaks volumes to the level of neglect you showed her," the chancellor remarked snidely.

Captain Yore paled, although Fie wasn't sure what about that comment was so cutting. Crow made an "oops" face.

The chancellor ignored them and turned to address Fie. "This gentleman is

none other than your lord husband, His Majesty King Roy.”

Fie blinked in shock and then took another serious look at the captain. He was right. Now that she thought about it, he was the spitting image of the portraits of King Roy she had seen many times before. Fie shrieked. No way! King Roy and Captain Yore were the same person? Honestly, she didn’t fully believe it. She’d have to check it with him later—

“I apologize,” Yore repeated with another bow, “that you suffered such harsh treatment at my hands.”

Fie frantically shook her head. “No, please don’t worry about it! I never told you, and besides, you more than made up for it with all the help you gave me as Captain Yore!” Then she paused. “Wait a minute. If you were the one who had me locked up in the first place, why’d you let me become a squire? Were you trying to bribe me to keep me quiet?”

This accusation stabbed Roy like a knife. He turned a further shade of white.

Fie quickly realized her mistake. “Oh, okay, never mind! Here, but, um, I guess if I had talked to you in the first place, I probably could have been treated a little nicer, right? So it’s my fault too for not communicating properly!” Fie realized that the only reason she could draw this conclusion now was because she had spent a whole year meeting new people and relying on them. The old Fie could never have done this. She didn’t have enough faith in anyone.

It was Fie’s whole attitude, this cheerfulness in the face of her aggressor, which dealt the ultimate blow to Roy’s battered psyche. But once he calmed down and thought about it, he realized it really was his fault. It was his prejudice that had led to him never once meeting her until, upon seeing her as Heath, he doted upon her in sympathy for her poor background, never once realizing that he was the one responsible for said background. What a farce!

Crow, too, as the one unable to stop Roy from this behavior, was hit by this as well. Talk about just deserts for the both of them... How could they apologize or make up for this? What was Roy to do? Certainly, he couldn’t make a decision here lightly.

But as for Fie, well... She used to want to punch King Roy’s lights out if she ever happened to run across him. Sure, it was probably impossible, and if she

did it would have no end of consequences, so this was never a serious plan. Still, that was how she thought of King Roy, but the King Roy of her imagination wasn't the man in front of her.

This was the man who always thought of those in trouble, who put his absolute best into everything he did, and who looked after Fie with such utter kindness when she became a squire. He was the man who gave her advice, counseled her when she was upset, and took her out to eat even when he was busy. This was her captain, a man who had proved to her time and time again that he had the biggest heart in the world.

Thus, she thought, it probably wouldn't do to picture him so rudely again. (Mind you, she probably shouldn't have done so before she had even met him, but what was done was done.) Okay, she decided. She'd forgive her captain, this King Roy. In fact, she'd forgiven him already.

"It's true," she said, "that I was treated badly when I first came here. But the year I spent as a squire was absolutely wonderful. And I have you to thank for that, both as King Roy for ruling the country and as Captain Yore for welcoming me in as a squire. So, thank you."

She hoped this would assuage at least some of his self-inflicted guilt, but it unfortunately only made it worse. Even though Fie's bad upbringing made her desperate for attention, mischievous, and sometimes mean, she was a good person on the inside. This was especially apparent to Roy, who had watched over her, doted on her during her squire training, and knew her to be a very good person. Whenever he saw her giving her best effort despite her rough childhood (or so he assumed) and small stature, he added another bullet point to the mental list of Fie's good qualities. That Fie could forgive him for causing her poor living situation multiplied the list's length several times over and flooded Roy with another wave of guilt. He had hurt this poor child, and the weight of this crime consumed him. He needed to spend his whole life making it up to her and give some serious thought about what action to take now—and yet, here she was, already forgiving him! It only served to trouble him further. It was agony.

Crow, not in the direct line of fire but still being clipped by the ricochet, glanced at Roy and thought to himself, *Aw, crap*. This was the first time he'd

ever seen Roy look this bad. He hadn't even made this face when a female hostage they were protecting was stabbed in the stomach. Roy looked so furious he might be about to order his own execution. He struggled through the quagmire of his excruciating guilt over this person he had victimized who still struggled on so bravely, so—

The chancellor interrupted this line of thought with a sigh. "This has been an eye-opening experience for me as well." He rarely spoke this plainly, and Roy wasn't sure what he meant by this. However, it was clear that whatever he had to say needed to be said. "I have always thought, Your Majesty, that you and I must have a simple lord and subject relationship. I deemed it inappropriate for me to treat you as any uncle treats his nephew. However, I believe that I may have been wrong about this as well. Looking back on it now, I wonder if I should have taken a more active role in your life."

Roy's eyes widened. He had always treated the chancellor as his uncle, but it was the chancellor himself who kept this distance between them.

"At any rate," Zorace continued, "let us save this discussion for another time. We will also discuss apologies and what is to be done at a later date. Your Majesty Princess Fie, we will see to it that you're given proper housing within the palace in the meantime."

"Wait, uh... You mean I can't go back to the dorm?" Fie asked. She wanted to go back to the place she was used to living in. Couldn't she at least stay there until all this business was dealt with?

"Why, do you plan on jumping through another flaming hoop?" the chancellor asked, glaring at her sternly.

Fie gulped and turned white. Oh yeah, she realized. She was still in trouble for that.

"You jumped through a what now?" Crow asked.

Ultimately, the meeting adjourned, as per the chancellor's wishes.

By the next day, the rumor mill had already picked up that Princess Fie was somewhere in the castle.

“Hey, did you hear? They’re saying Princess Fie is in the royal palace!”

“No way! I thought they had her shut away somewhere in the consort’s chambers!”

Apparently, *the* Princess Fie was not only staying in the royal palace but was even being allowed to walk around freely. She was infamous for having an illicit love affair with King Roy before he, in his dislike of her, locked her away in her chambers. She wasn’t recognized as his second wife, so everyone still referred to her as a princess. What was she doing in the palace? What was going on? And was she really as hideous as the rumors made her out to be?

The young, gossip-loving (and, let’s face it, not exactly the classiest) palace maids were terribly excited. “Want to go try to see her?” one asked.

“But isn’t she upstairs?” her friend replied. “Just think what would happen if anyone found out we went up there.” Where one worked in the castle was dependent on one’s social status, and these maids on the castle’s lower levels were not allowed to enter the upper floors, nor the heart of the palace. The higher one rose in the castle, the greater the importance of the people who lived there, all the way up to the top floor, which hosted the rooms of the king and his wife themselves. Only a few select maids were ever allowed in there.

“Yeah, but she’s only on the second floor, isn’t she? I’m sure that’ll be fine. None of the guards or the ministers can tell us apart anyway.”

“That’s true! I guess we’ll be fine so long as none of the older maids catch us.”

Brimming with curiosity, the young maids made up their minds and set off for the second floor.

“So, where is she?” a maid asked.

“Do you know, I bet she hasn’t even been with a single guy her entire time here. She’s *that* ugly.”

“Let’s see her for ourselves so we can tell the others.” They snickered to themselves as they crept around the forbidden second floor.

However, whether from bad luck or maybe poetic justice, one of the older maids spotted them almost immediately. “Hey!” she snapped. “Aren’t you lot

supposed to be working in the gardens today? What do you think you're doing up here?"

"Oh no!" one of the young maids squealed.

"What should we do?" another asked.

"Run!"

Unsure what else to do, the girls broke out into a run. The senior maid chased after them, yelling, "Wait, stop! Look out, there's a—"

In their hurry, the maids all tripped over the step leading out into the courtyard and fell over on each other like a pack of dominos, moaning in pain. The impact with the ground was hard enough to bring tears to their eyes. Yet just then, someone reached a hand out to help them up.

"Are you okay?" the person asked. Her voice had a clear, sunny ring to it.

The maids' tear-filled eyes traveled upwards and saw a girl who looked about the same age as them, with beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes. Her face was charming and youthful, but she had something of a dignified air about her.

The girl helped the maids to their feet one by one. "Are you hurt anywhere?" she asked.

"No, thank you, we're okay..." The maids shook their heads. As they sniffled through their tears, they wondered, *Wait, who is she?*

Judging by her manner of dress and the stately way she conducted herself, this mystery girl was quite obviously of a far different social class than the maids. However, none of them had received any notice that a young noblewoman of this age would be staying as a guest in the palace. If she was a nobleman's daughter or a princess from a far-off kingdom, even these minor-league maids would have heard about her through the grapevine by now.

Several maids of a much higher station ran up to the girl. "Your Majesty Princess Fie, are you quite all right?" one asked.

"Do please step away from those girls," another advised. "It is horribly inappropriate for them to be up here!"

Wait, Princess Fie? This girl was Princess Fie? In their shock, the young maids

completely forgot about their pursuer, who was now glaring daggers at them.

Fie stepped in front of the younger girls to protect them from the elder's wrath, trying to pacify the senior maids. "It's okay," she said. "They probably wanted to see me because of the rumors. I don't mind."

"Your Majesty, even so, this is still an issue," one protested.

"It's my fault since I was the one who wanted to go down to the second floor in the first place," Fie said. "Sorry about that."

"Nonsense, Your Majesty."

The older maids looked troubled. They were supposed to *serve* the princess, not receive apologies from her.

After fretting over it for a few moments, the group let out a collective sigh.

"Very well," the leader of the maids said. "We will overlook it just this once." She would pardon the girls for letting their curiosity lead to rule breaking. "Girls, return to your duties immediately."

"Don't go troubling the senior maids, okay?" Fie advised. "I'm going to swing by the kitchen and then head back up to the third floor." She smiled, waved, and darted off.

The elder maids scurried after her, calling, "Oh, Your Majesty, please wait!"

Still sniffing, the young maids watched them go in mute amazement. Finally, one mumbled, "She's not at all like the rumors..."

"Yeah, she's not even remotely ugly. She's actually really cute."

"And she's so nice too."

She was so unlike their expectations that the maids almost felt disappointed. They had been eager to discover the source of all this gossip, but this was a bit of a letdown. Not only that, but Fie had had to bail them out too...

"Should we go back?" one of the maids suggested.

"Yeah..."

Filled with an odd sense of defeat, the maids returned drearily to work.

Meanwhile, Fie's continual roaming of the castle was causing the older maids no end of trouble. To prevent her from leaving the castle again, the chancellor had commanded her to stay on the top floor, but Fie had decided to expand her territory down to include the second floor as well. (And just who was it again who had said not to trouble the senior maids?)

"That looks so good," Fie said. "It wouldn't hurt to have just a little bite, right?"

"No, Your Majesty. This dining hall is reserved for the cabinet ministers. Your Majesty's meals are being prepared in a much more suitable location."

Fie grumbled and pouted like a boy.

She now wore dresses every day, and was waited on by maid servants at all times. Her hair was still short, but now it was done up in a girl's style. Yet honestly, after all her time spent as a squire, Fie would rather put on pants and go run around outside. What stopped her was the knowledge that doing so would bother both these maids and her captain. (Granted, this knowledge did not stop *all* of her escapades.)

Still, she bet Queen would enjoy seeing her like this. He had mentioned a couple times previously that he would have liked to see her a bit more girly. *I wonder how he's doing*, she thought. She hoped that he wasn't too upset by this whole thing happening so suddenly.

She hadn't told Captain Yore about her relationship with Queen yet either. She hadn't found the opportunity to talk with him, but she figured he might be pretty receptive to the idea. After all, Captain Yore, a.k.a. King Roy, was in love with Fielle, so why would he care if Fie dated someone else? (Although wouldn't he be concerned about his reputation?)

Therefore, Fie's primary concern was hoping that Queen wasn't worried about her. She wanted to find an opportunity to show him that she was okay, but this was rather challenging, given that she had been told to stay in the palace. Darn that chancellor! For some reason, she couldn't find it in herself to defy his orders. So until he gave his permission, Fie had to stay put.

Still, living in the palace wasn't all bad. Once the final doubts about her identity were dispelled, Fie was allowed to visit her sister again. It was to be

their first reunion in a year, and Fie couldn't wait.

The very next night, Fie went to Fielle and Roy's bedchamber. The security outside the door was quite strict, as was befitting for the quarters of the king and his queen consort, yet they let Fie in readily enough. There was another door behind the first, and the moment Fie opened it, a blonde girl leaped at her for a hug yelling, "Fie!"

She was a head taller than Fie, slender, and utterly gorgeous. Her exquisite face looked like it had been carved by angels; Fie, who was quite pretty in her own right, couldn't even compare. This vision of loveliness, Fielle, blinked tears out of her eyes as she awkwardly (not that Fie really noticed) smacked into Fie for a hug.

"Good to see you too," Fie said. "How've you been, Fielle?"

"I missed you so much!"

"Aw, come on, it's okay." Fie gave her sister a wry smile as she gently patted her head. Fielle was well known for her dignity and grace, but sometimes, when she and Fie were alone, she acted like a little child. Hugging someone taller than her reminded Fie of hugging Queen.

"And how have *you* been?" Fielle asked. "Did you have a horrible time when you suddenly had to come with me to Orstoll?"

Wanting to prevent Fielle from worrying, Fie said, "I'm fine, really. I had a lot of good times here. Hey, Lynette, good to see you too."

"Oh, yes! I am so very glad to hear you were able to leave that dreadful place, Your Majesty. I always knew you'd make it out someday." Lynette's eyes swam with tears. For the past year, she had set aside time in her busy schedule to visit Fie, but Fie had a feeling that might not have alleviated Lynette's worries entirely.

Fielle's ears picked up on a certain phrase. "What do you mean, 'that dreadful place'? 'I always knew you'd make it out someday'? Was Fie locked away somewhere?"

Fie and Lynette shared an identical “yikes” face. So much for keeping this a secret from Fielle.

“Don’t worry about it, Fielle,” Fie said. “It’s all over now.”

“No, tell me!” Despite Fie’s best efforts to misdirect her, Fielle stubbornly demanded to know the truth. “Were you suffering all because of me?”

I guess she won’t be fooled, Fie thought. She sighed internally and then decided to tell Fielle the whole story, although she fudged some of the details, hoping to make it sound like she had wanted to be a knight the whole time. She tried to make the first part of her story as brief as possible before skipping ahead to the squire part in order to spare Fielle and Captain Yore’s feelings.

“I-I-It’s all my fault you suffered so much...” Fielle sobbed, her shoulders visibly shaking.

Fie shook her head and grinned. “It’s not your fault at all. And honestly, this last year I had was really awesome, I swear. I made tons of new friends, met a lot of really kind people, went to all sorts of interesting places, and saw all kinds of things I had no idea even existed. If it’s because of you that I was treated poorly to begin with, then it’s also because of you that I got to have such an awesome time. Right?”

Fielle looked at her sister’s smile and thought, *No one but Fie could look at someone who subjected them to such cruel treatment and give them such a beautiful smile. Forget what I look like, she’s a far more beautiful person than I will ever be.* Fielle understood that it was her fault and it would be remiss of her to forget that, but all the same, Fie’s words soothed her heart.

Just as Fielle began to relax, Fie said, “Oh, I should mention this too,” when another important fact just struck her. “Did you know I also have a boyfriend? But let’s keep that part secret.”

A split second later, there was a huge scream. This was from Lynette; Fielle, on the other hand, looked overjoyed at the news. “That’s wonderful!” she cried.

Lynette looked about ready to jump down Fie’s throat. “Aren’t you having an affair?!” she cried.

“Yeah, I guess. Whoops, sorry.” Fie had only been thinking about Queen’s

feelings for her, but when she later thought about it objectively, she realized that, yeah, this was technically an affair. After all, she was already married.

Lynette trembled. “N-No, Your Majesty! You’re not the one to blame! It’s your b-b-boyfriend that’s the problem! Not to mention His Majesty the King for marrying you and then neglecting you!” This last comment seemed to have slipped out in the force of her anger.

“No,” Fie said, “Queen’s a really good person, and I respect King Roy a lot. So I’m definitely at fault for this too. It was my choice to date Queen, right?”

This stopped Lynette from ranting any further, but deep down, she was terribly upset about Fie’s news. Here she was, finally able to meet with Fie in a public setting, and some random stranger had swooped in and stolen her princess right out from under her nose. She knew she was just being selfish at this point but Lynette, ever the sore loser, asked anyway, “D-Do you really suppose this...person...is suitable for Your Majesty? I mean, do you really love him?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Fie said. Sure, she loved him as a friend, but...maybe some things were better left unsaid. Fie wanted to avoid explaining the whole complicated situation, and besides, she didn’t even know herself if she really liked him in that way or not.

Lynette whimpered and turned a pale white, but Fielle cried, “Why, that’s fantastic!” Her eyes shone with excitement. Neither of the girls had much experience with romance, so they couldn’t guess at the hidden meaning behind Fie’s quick response.

Now that the conversation had calmed down, Fie took the opportunity to look around the room. “By the way,” she said, “is Captain Yore... I mean, King Roy not back yet? I don’t want to overstay my welcome, so I should get going soon.” She was thrilled to see her sister again, but it was getting late. She didn’t want to intrude on any of the couple’s time together.

Lynette and Fielle pulled a face. Fielle looked at Lynette, nodded, and then said, “Um, the thing is... King Roy and I sleep in separate bedrooms.”

“Huh?! Why’s that? Did you guys have a fight?”

Fie knew about the captain's problem with how he treated women, but she had also heard that he and Queen Fielle were head over heels for each other. She hadn't expected them to have any marital issues.

Fielle timidly admitted, "Um... well, you see... King Roy and I aren't actually married..."

Talk about a shocking confession!

Chapter 28 — Fielle and the Pottery Prince

The following is a story from before Fie was forcibly hauled off to Orstoll to pad her daddy's royal treasury—ahem, confined in her chambers. It was about a month after Fie and Fielle's fifteenth birthdays. Fie celebrated her birthday alone, while Fielle's birthday was marked by a grand celebration with her parents and all the kingdom's subjects. But Fielle's life wasn't any more idyllic either.

"You know," one passing maid servant said to another, "I saw Princess Fielle give her entire snack to a bird earlier."

"Why, how kind of her."

Fielle pretended that she couldn't hear them singing her praises. *I wasn't feeding it per se, she thought. I let my guard down, and the bird snatched the doughnut right out of my hand. What a shame. I wanted to share it with Fie...*

Fielle was well aware of her propensity for bungling things. On the inside, she was truly a very timid person, making mistakes in all that she tried. However, much to Fielle's great displeasure, everyone around her kept interpreting those mistakes as good things! Compared to Fielle, her sister Fie had a much stronger character, quick-thinking mind, and an all around stellar personality. Fielle simply couldn't comprehend why all the adults around them said bad things about Fie, but she was too much of a coward to speak up and correct them about either herself or Fie. Instead, she worked with her all her might to live up to everyone's expectations.

To make matters even worse, Fielle's popularity extended past the kingdom's borders, and her parents kept accepting invitations for her to come visit foreign lands without ever considering if Fielle even wanted to go. That meant that Fielle needed to embark on yet another trip, this time to the neighboring kingdom of Kassandra.

Two days later, Fielle found herself focusing on the lump of clay turning on a

pottery wheel before her. Fielle's stay in Cassandra would include a sightseeing tour of various locations including the workshop of an expert pottery maker. The pottery maker had recommended Fielle try it herself, but she wasn't immediately keen to do so. She was already sneaking out late at night after the maids were asleep to practice the basic things like manners and dancing. And then pottery? No way. She knew she couldn't pull that off on her first try. However, once she actually tried it, she found manipulating the clay oddly calming, and it was fun to create something with her own hands. Before long, she was completely absorbed in it.

"Most young noblewomen would never want to dirty their hands like this, but Princess Fielle threw herself into the work without so much as a single objection. She truly is one of a kind."

"Indeed, she must have a truly generous and tolerant heart."

Fielle would normally hear these comments by accident but now paid no attention to them. She focused all of her concentration on the clay as it gradually took shape beneath her hands. *Just a little bit more...* However, in her excitement at being almost finished, she used a bit more force than she should have and accidentally warped the soft clay into some weird shape. Fielle screamed internally. (She was too anxious to make an actual sound. It wouldn't have fit her image.)

Still, Fielle expected the people watching her to make some comment about how this was exactly what they expected (such was her understanding of how the world worked), but to her surprise, the aristocrats watching her did not sound impressed. One of them, a minister of Cassandra, asked, "Did she just make a mistake?" They had been told that Fielle could do anything, even make a perfect piece of pottery on her first try. Little did they know that her success up until now was the product of Fielle hearing about this trip days in advance and practicing like mad.

I'm such a klutz, Fielle lamented. However, it bothered her less that she had messed up in front of other people and more that she hadn't been able to make a proper piece of pottery even after all of her practice. Apart from the cabinet ministers, some members of the royal family and various princes from foreign countries were also in Fielle's retinue today. They weren't here to see pottery

as much as to see her, so her mistake unsettled them. They had deified Fielle in their minds. Everyone thought she was an omnipotent being.

Then, a dignified old man with a majestic white beard spoke up. “No, that is no mistake.”

“Are you certain?” said the cabinet minister. He was afraid to challenge the old man, for this man was none other than the famous pottery maker Purpoze himself.

Purpoze scrutinized Fielle’s deformed cup and then gravely proclaimed, “This curve. This shape. At first glance, it appears disorderly, and yet in this it achieves a perfect harmony. Observe it from this angle. Does it not look as if it was wrought by the hands of the Lord Plasse himself? Surely this must have been Princess Fielle’s intent all along. What a daring design for a teacup! Why, in all my fifty years as a potter, it never occurred to me to try such a thing in my work. What a masterpiece, Your Highness!”

“Oh! I see it now!” cried the minister.

“She must have put a flaw in the cup to represent our flawed society!”

“What brilliant workmanship!” the other watchers echoed.

Purpoze could not have been any more wrong, but that didn’t stop the crowd from once again singing her praises. Fielle watched them all uncomfortably, while deep down, she thought to herself, *No, that really was just a mistake!* All she wanted was to do a good job, not have everyone think her mistake was a grand success. But such was par for the course in Fielle’s life. At this point, her reputation had taken on a life of its own. Everyone thought she was a saint when she was really just a clumsy, ditzy spaz. It was too late now to confess the truth. If she admitted that she hadn’t done this on purpose, Purpoze would be put to shame in front of all these important people, so she followed his suggestion and added a handle to her weirdly shaped teacup.

“Ooh, what a fantastic design! We must hurry and spread this type of cup throughout the whole kingdom!” cried a minister.

“Absolutely. Let’s do just that!”

Purpoze and the ministers raised Fielle’s messed-up cup overhead and

marveled over it. Then they rounded on Fielle. “If you’d be so kind, Your Highness, I’d love to sell this design in my shop!”

“Please, me as well, Your Highness!”

Fielle was mortified that they wanted to mass produce her mistake, but she ducked her head so they wouldn’t see her pained grimace. Just then, she noticed a young man crouching on his knees. He was clutched at his stomach and convulsed like he was in pain. *What’s wrong? Is he sick?* Fielle thought. *Oh no, is he okay?* She wanted to rush over him, only to be stopped before even rising when a suppressed snort slipped past his lips.

That was when she finally realized. The boy wasn’t having a fit. He was— *Is he laughing at me?!* His giggling grew louder and louder until everyone noticed it. Clutching his stomach, the man escalated into a full-on scream of hysterical laughter. Whatever he was laughing at was so funny it caused him to tear up, yet he was the only one laughing here by a long margin. All eyes in the room turned to him.

The prince of Atolia, who had come to Cassandra expressly to see Fielle, scowled at the man. “What’s so funny?” he barked.

The young man rose and, with a dramatic bow and a charming grin, introduced himself to the prince. “Forgive me, Prince Sanga, for that was terribly rude of me. I am Prince Tomas of Vorland, at your service. It is my absolute pleasure to make your acquaintance.” His movements were metropolitan and his manner of speaking was laced with the refinement befitting a man of royalty, but the young man did not look the part of a prince. He wore an apron over a set of work clothes, making him look more like a laborer than an aristocrat.

“Vorland?” Prince Sanga repeated.

“Isn’t that the tiny kingdom next to Daeman?” one of the other princes asked. They, too, were surprised to find that this young man in the apron was actually a prince.

Prince Sanga looked momentarily taken aback before he steeled his face into a stern glare and shouted at the prince, “If you *are* the prince of Vorland, then what are you doing? I don’t believe Princess Fielle requested your presence!” (I

didn't request yours either, Fielle thought.)

Vorland was indeed one of the smaller countries that surrounded Daeman. It lacked any major industries or defining points in its history, especially when compared with Daeman. Other countries did not regard it highly. Even though it shared a border with Daeman, Vorland had little to offer in terms of cultural exchange, so Daeman, which was mostly interested in buttering up to richer countries, did not have much contact with it. Granted, Daeman was no large kingdom either. It could just as easily have been lumped into the same category as Vorland.

This Prince Tomas was a slender, kind-looking young man with green eyes and silver hair. Fielle found herself thinking he looked attractive, but perhaps due in part to his slightly vacant expression, she didn't think he was the type to have a lot of girls fawning over him.

"Master Purpoze kindly granted me to learn the ways of pottery from him; thus, I have every right to be here as his apprentice. I apologize if this has inconvenienced you in any way, Prince Sanga."

"What's a prince doing learning to be a potter?"

This apparently made no sense to the others, but Fielle realized this explained why he was in an apron.

Prince Sanga, looking even more confused than before, glared at Tomas and made to snap at him again, but Purpoze stepped in. "My apologies, Your Highness," he said. "Tomas here sometimes behaves very oddly. It's just in his character. You'll have to excuse us, as we must be off to fire Princess Fielle's new creation. Come, Tomas."

"Yes, Master." Tomas followed Purpoze out the door, leaving the bewildered crowd behind.

Fielle passed the time afterwards with Lynette in one room of the workshop. This room was furnished with a luxurious couch and table set which did not match the rest of the unsophisticated workshop, suggesting, to Fielle's guilt, that it had been set up in such a way just for her.

“The carriage will be here soon,” Lynette told her as she prepared a pot of tea. “Until it does, your ladyship is to relax here.”

The rest of Fielle’s agenda on her Cassandra sightseeing tour was filled with attending the grand opening ceremony for a newly built art museum, assisting with visiting and donating to the children in a church’s orphanage, and attending a royal ball at the palace. Lynette guessed she was tired from being surrounded by people all day, so she indirectly cleared the room by sending the other maidservants off on assorted errands. This gave Fielle a bit of a breather as Lynette made tea for her.

After Purpoze and Prince Tomas left, the other aristocrats and princes started hounding Fielle and demanding her attention, but to be frank, Fielle was not really a social butterfly. She much rather preferred sticking with the people she already got along with. Sometimes she thought she’d have been better off born as a commoner since she just wasn’t suited for this at all.

Just then, someone knocked on the door, and a woman who looked like a lady-in-waiting peeked her head around the frame. Lynette went to receive her. The woman hurriedly whispered something to Lynette and then rushed away, all in a dither.

Lynette returned to Fielle and said, “Unfortunately, the carriage appears to have broken down. I’d like to step out and assess the situation myself, if it pleases Your Highness.” Then she too ran out of the room, leaving Fielle utterly alone.

Fielle sat there for a time and finished drinking her tea. After a while, however, she started to feel uncomfortable being there all by herself. She got up to check to see if Lynette was coming back (although of course she knew Lynette wasn’t) and left the room.

There was not a soul in sight. Everyone must have been dealing with the carriage issue. Lynette clearly wasn’t on her way back, but Fielle had no desire to return to the room either. Instead, she began wandering the workshop aimlessly. Fielle was not, perhaps, the most experienced person in the world, and normally everyone else made the decisions of where she should go next for her.

As she padded down the passageway, her shoes thumping on the flagstones underneath, she noticed an open door. She peered into the room, and by the faint light of the window, judged that it was empty. She walked in, not for any particular reason—but then again, her roaming around was not for any particular reason either apart from a general sense of unease. This, Fielle thought, was the story of her life: roaming the few places she was allowed to go out of fear of defying other people’s expectations.

The room was filled with shelves carrying pottery of all different shapes and sizes—pots, plates painted with artwork, gorgeous white porcelain vases, and more. This must be the room where they stored all the completed work, Fielle thought. Purpoze was truly a master; the workmanship was brilliant. Fielle wandered from shelf to shelf admiring every one of the pieces.

Suddenly, she heard a man chuckle behind her. “See anything you like?”

Fielle’s heart leaped into her throat. She thought she was alone!

“Sorry, did I startle you?” She spun around and saw that it was Prince Tomas, still in his apron and grinning at her. He was laughing at her, and he didn’t even have the gall to care that she knew! This annoyed her, but Fielle was not one to be angry often. Or, at least, other people didn’t *think* so.

She forced herself to calm down and then responded to his first question. “Y-Yes, I do. I now understand why everyone says Purpoze is such a magnificent artisan. These pieces are all lovely.”

She thought it was a perfect response, but it only made Prince Tomas even more amused. This time, he didn’t even bother to hide his mirth. Fielle had no idea why he was laughing at her, especially since she had said this purely because that was what other people expected her to say. She turned rigid as Prince Tomas’s laughter brought tears to his eyes. What was so funny?

Still amused, Prince Tomas finally apologized to her. “Looking at you reminded me of that whole affair earlier,” he explained. “Sorry. Master Purpoze really does know his stuff, but he tends to suck up to authority figures, you know? He was only acting like that since you’re a princess and all.”

Then Fielle understood. He was laughing at her messed-up cup—the one she had worked her butt off for and accidentally made into the curio of the century!

How infuriating, even for her! She didn't let her anger show on her face, but oh, she felt it.

Prince Tomas left Fielle there, fighting back a small objection, as he went to go start on some other task. Fielle tried to stubbornly ignore him, but she could see out of the corner of her eye that he was kneading more clay. It eventually dawned on her that this was the same kind of clay she had used to make her cup.

Unable to help herself, she asked, "What are you doing?" Prince Tomas dropped the clay on one of the nearby pottery wheels with a powerful thump and grinned back at Fielle.

"The Priestess of Healing is not satisfied with the pot she created, is she? Would she like to try again? Perhaps *I'll* actually teach her."

"Uh..." She was at a loss for words. Pottery wasn't her job or anything. No one expected her to do it. But did she *want* to do it? She'd never made that choice before.

What should I do? she wondered. Her first thought was that it might dirty her dress, which would inconvenience Lynette. According to her usual way of thinking, this meant that refusal was the better option, but for some reason, that didn't sit right with her. When it had been Purpoze's time to teach her, he hadn't given her very detailed instructions, perhaps out of a sense of reserve. *Because I'm the Priestess of Healing*, Fielle thought, *so he probably figured I could make something amazing right off the bat without being taught*. She had ultimately learned by following his example, but if she had been taught properly the first time, maybe her poor cup wouldn't have come out so misshapen. She knew she shouldn't put the blame on him, but...but...no, she really shouldn't...after all, if she showed up at the party tonight with her dress covered in clay, her maids would fly off the handle... Okay, yes, she *did* wish her cup had turned out a little bit better, but it was so selfish to think like that...besides, everyone thought it was a weird teacup and ran with it anyway...

As she puzzled over how to respond, something hit her. "Wait a minute..." she muttered. The apron Tomas had on looked like perfect work clothes. She could pull it on over her sleeves and tie it at the back, completely covering her dress,

and her dress wouldn't get dirty!

As if reading her thoughts, Tomas said, "Don't worry. Your clothes won't get dirty if you wear an apron." Acting as though she had already said yes, he smoothly finished his preparations and sat her in front of the pottery wheel.

Finally, Fielle began to feel good about this. "O-Okay," she said, "but only just a little..." Just a little *what* she had no idea, but her mind was made up—she wanted to try making a cup one more time. Lynette would probably be coming back any minute now, so this was her last chance.

She was a little nervous. Tomas told her, "The first thing is to relax, okay? Don't let your shoulders tense up. When you're calm, it'll come through in your work too. Try taking a deep breath."

"Okay," she said, and she followed his instructions. She let her shoulders relax just the slightest bit. Then, with Tomas guiding her, she dove into making a cup once again.

"That's right, gentle hands. You don't need to put any force into it. Go ahead and spin the wheel a little faster, okay? You don't need to be scared. You're doing just fine."

"Right."

Fielle spun the wheel with a serious expression on her face as the clay took shape.

"Watch your posture," Tomas warned. "You're getting a little crooked."

"Right!"

Tomas's instruction style was thorough and polite, and Fielle found it easy to let him guide her whenever she was about to mess up. Finally, after twenty minutes of learning and working, a beautiful cup lay on the wheel before her.

"I did it!" she cried. Her cheeks were red, and her voice was more elevated than normal, but in her excitement, she didn't even notice. The finished cup was nothing out of the ordinary, but Fielle was happy enough that it looked like a proper cup. She couldn't believe she had made this with her own two hands. As she looked it over, a smile crept onto her face.

She didn't notice Tomas watching her with fond eyes. "Is the Priestess of Healing happy now?" he asked.

Hearing the teasing tone in his voice again put a damper on Fielle's excitement. She looked down. "Um, you know..." she said.

"Hm? What's up?"

"I have a name, you know. It's Fielle." *What in the world am I saying?* she thought to herself.

But Tomas only looked puzzled for a moment before smiling at her again and saying, "Oh, sorry, Fielle."

The moment he said her name, she felt a strange, warm sensation blossoming in her heart. Yet before she could wonder what this meant, she heard Lynette's voice calling from the corridor. "Princess Fielle! My lady, where are you?"

Oh, shoot. She was supposed to be in her room. Lynette must have been worried sick. *I have to go*, she thought, but just as she stood up, she stopped in her tracks. The cup was shaped, but it wasn't done until she fired it in the kiln. Fielle looked back at her cup, this cup she had made purely for herself, before Tomas picked it up gently.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll fire it and send it to you once it's done. It's yours, after all. You worked hard making it. Be sure to wash your hands before you go, but hurry. That maidservant is worried about you."

"Oh, yes!" Fielle washed her hands in the sink and then raced out into the hall. She dashed over to Lynette and said, "I'm so sorry. I went for a walk and lost track of time."

"Really? Oh, thank goodness; I was afraid something had happened to you. They've prepared a new carriage for you, so let's be off to the church, okay? It's the one that runs the orphanage."

"Yes, let's." As she set off for the coach, she turned one last time to wave and flash a smile at the odd, apron-wearing prince and her precious cup cradled in his hands.

Two weeks later, Fielle returned to Daeman. As a famed princess with healing powers, she received an endless stream of presents to her room from her parents and from princes in neighboring kingdoms, nigh on every day. The presents were usually precious jewels, beautiful dresses, and the like, but truth be told, Fielle didn't really appreciate any of them. If anything, having to memorize the endless list of who brought which gift to what party and writing countless thank you notes was a complete hassle.

When today's pile of presents arrived, the maidservants went through and checked who each sent each one. One maid picked up a small white box and read to Fielle, "It says it's from His Highness, Prince Tomas of Vorland, Your Highness."

"Vorland?" another maid repeated. "We don't have anything to do with Vorland, do we?"

"What is he thinking sending a gift to our Princess Fielle? Perhaps he's trying to curry favor with her."

"And what a tiny box at that. But I suppose we can't expect much from such a poor kingdom."

The maid finally looked up from the box and almost jumped out of her skin. There, standing right smack dab in front of her, was Fielle. Granted, the maid served Fielle on a daily basis, but having her mistress suddenly appear right under her nose almost made her heart stop.

"Um...can you...? Give me... Please!" Fielle was normally quite well-spoken, but today she tripped over her words in her own excitement as she extended her hand.

It took the maid a few seconds to register that Fielle was asking for the box. "Uh, here you go," she said and awkwardly passed it over. Fielle immediately spun around and speed walked back to her seat, whereupon she tore open the box. She looked like she thought even the simple act of opening the box was too slow for her, which alarmed everyone, even Lynette. Fielle had never shown this much interest in any of her presents before, to say nothing of the fact that she *never* opened her own gifts. Just what could be in that box? The maids gulped as they watched Fielle lift out a...a...a teacup? Yes, it was a perfectly

ordinary teacup.

The gossipy maids broke out into whispers. “It’s just a teacup!”

“It doesn’t even look that expensive.”

“This Prince Tomas must have a lot of nerve to send our princess such a shoddy gift!”

This couldn’t possibly have been what Princess Fielle was expecting. Yet before the maids’ very eyes, Fielle looked at the teacup reverently and then threw herself on her bed, giggling. She kicked her feet back and forth and rolled all over the bed in a manner highly unbecoming of her graceful image.

“Your Highness?” one of the maids asked.

“What happened, Your Highness?” the other chorused. “Are you all right?”

They had never seen her act like this before! The maids began to panic. However, Lynette was the only one among them who understood that Princess Fielle was fine and, in fact, wildly happy. Lynette’s eyes grew wide with shock. No one else but her realized the princess was finally expressing her joy just as any other teenage girl would as she held the pretty, white cup close to her heart.

Three months after the Cassandra tour, Fielle received an invitation to yet another party in a completely different kingdom. Despite her high renown as the Priestess of Healing, Fielle by all rights was still a princess of a small, backwater kingdom, so she normally only attended parties in the various countries in the same western region as Daeman. However, this party was being held in a kingdom closer to the center of the continent. Fielle was not keen on going, being that the party was so much farther from home than normal and that this kingdom had close connections with more prominent nations, but her parents readily accepted the invitation on her behalf.

Thus, Fielle unwillingly attended, finding to her dismay that the party was completely packed with the royal family, local aristocrats, and many guests of honor from neighboring lands who were all here for one reason—to see the unparalleled beauty with miraculous powers that was Princess Fielle. The

princess was rarely seen outside of little Podunk western countries, so aristocracy from the central and far eastern portions of the continent flocked to see her in this more metropolitan venue.

All eyes trained on her the minute she arrived. *Oh no*, she thought. *This is nerve-racking*. Fielle's inner feelings were blanketed in storm clouds, but to outsiders (to her misfortune, perhaps), she looked as dignified as a country girl surrounded by big city folk possibly could. Fielle let the teeming crowds approach her and strike up conversation, only offering the occasional "uh-huh" and "that's nice" in return, when suddenly, through the throng, she spotted a familiar face.

Oh! she thought. *That's Prince Tomas!* What a surprise to run into him here. Tomas had ditched the apron in favor of formal dress and looked every part the prince. It went without saying, but his outfit suited him very well.

Fielle stared at him from a distance for several moments as he laughed and chatted with other partygoers. *I had a feeling he'd be popular*, Fielle thought. Fielle was popular at this party as well, far more than Tomas, so much that she had become the center of the whole affair, drowning in the sheer number of people congregating around her. However, all these people clung to her purely because they thought being close to the Priestess of Healing might somehow work out in their favor. Everyone who spoke to her kept their agendas hidden behind smiles and inane chatter. They were never interested in Fielle herself; her reputation and the resultant boon from associating with her were their only concerns.

Compared to them, the people surrounding Prince Tomas belonged to another species altogether. Tomas stood along the wall far removed from the center of the party with a little group that chatted amiably among themselves. The group never fully seemed to dissipate, as whenever one person left to talk with someone else, another naturally took their place, striking up a pleasant, animated conversation with the prince. That, Fielle thought, must be what it was like to talk with people when you were well and truly liked.

Additionally, Prince Tomas sought out those who were alone and likewise roped them into conversation. At first, many of these people were confused, but the pleasant chatter gradually brought smiles to their faces, and before long

they were talking and mixing with the rest of the prince's friend group. *How nice*, Fielle thought longingly as she watched him with the others.

For a moment, she was happy to have encountered a friendly face at this party, but the crowd of people around her prevented her from approaching him, leaving her without the chance to actually talk with him. Fielle envied all the lucky people who could walk up to Tomas whenever they wanted more than she envied the prince himself.

In her distraction, Fielle didn't notice a noblewoman attempting to get her attention. "Your Highness, I simply adore your dress," the woman said. "That gorgeous white fabric looks just like Your Highness's... Your Highness?"

Fielle finally realized someone was addressing her, snapped back to reality, and hurriedly tried to cover her mistake by plastering on a smile. As she mentally scrolled through the list of party attendees in her mind to find this woman's name, she said, "Oh, yes, thank you. Your dress is wonderfully becoming as well, Your Highness Princess Marcy. That deep ocean blue indigo brings out the lovely black of your hair just marvelously."

Princess Marcy tittered in a ladylike way. "That it does. I commissioned this dress from a masterful artisan here over a year ago."

Princess Marcy didn't seem to have noticed what Fielle was looking at. Fielle breathed an internal sigh of relief. Princess Marcy was the younger sister of the local king, and so it wouldn't do to ignore her. Fielle rallied herself, shooed away her desire to watch the prince, and struck up a polite conversation with the princess.

Once Princess Marcy was satisfied and departed with a smile, Fielle allowed herself a moment to look back at what Prince Tomas was doing. Her heart stopped. Tomas was smiling and talking to a girl! She had beautiful, long black hair, captivating, deep crimson makeup, and eyes as dark blue as the night sky. Her height complemented Tomas's well, and she brimmed with mature charm. Fielle knew who she was. Everyone in the whole region knew who she was. This was Lady Ren  eth, she of the scandalous love affairs. Ren  eth was five years Fielle's senior and well known for courting many different princes and assorted aristocrats from around the continent; in fact, it was said she once had as many

as five beaux at a single time.

Now Ren  eth and Tomas seemed to be having *quite* the pleasant conversation with one another. *No way*, Fielle thought. *They can't be. Are they? Are they boyfriend and girlfriend?* Now her interest was piqued. How did these two know each other? Were they close? What kind of relationship did they have? She whimpered internally.

Though she hoped no one else noticed, Fielle could not take her eyes off of them for the rest of the party.

During a lull in the party, Fielle, feeling mentally exhausted, took a break in the room set aside for her. Sure, she had been to lots of crowded parties before, but this one was so much more...*more*...

Okay, it was the fact that she couldn't stop worrying throughout the whole party over Prince Tomas and Lady Ren  eth. Fielle kept a watchful eye on their conversation for most of the event as she desperately tried to conceal her concern from those around her. Thanks to her practiced and perfect responses, the other partygoers didn't notice her preoccupation with the prince, but Lynette knew something was up. After all, she had served Fielle for four years by then.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?" she asked.

Fielle trusted Lynette as much as she did Fie. Maybe, Fielle thought, it would be a good idea to tell Lynette about this situation, and these feelings that she couldn't wrap her head around.

Lynette listened to the story in shock. "Are you in *love* with him, Your Highness?" she asked. Lynette had never been in love herself, but this checked out with what she knew from romance stories.

Fielle turned bright red. "A-Am I?!"

Lynette had never seen Fielle express her feelings so openly before, and it was this that convinced her.

"Am I...in love with Prince Tomas...?" Now that Lynette had broached the idea, Fielle recognized for the first time that this might indeed be love. Still, this

was so sudden. She could barely believe it. Was she *really* in love with Prince Tomas? The sheer thought of it set her heart pounding and her cheeks turning even redder. *A-A-Am I really in love with him?!* She felt guilty, because she was no good at anything and he was an absolutely remarkable person. And yet her heart couldn't stop thundering whenever she thought about him, and her mind was filled with little else these days.

Seeing Fielle in such a state resolved Lynette to make a decision. Fielle's parents, Lynette knew, would almost certainly not approve of this match, as Tomas's home country did not boast the cultural or economic strength to attract Daeman's attention. Fielle's parents were not terribly concerned about who would succeed the crown; if worst came to worst, it could always pass to the king's nephew. Instead, they made every effort to sell Fielle off to the most appropriate suitor (read: the highest bidder) from the passel of princes all vying for her hand. Knowing this, Lynette vowed to support Fielle's first true love.

"Very well," said Lynette. "I am going to try something!" She then swept from the room.

Twenty minutes later, Lynette returned to pick up Fielle, guided her to a room, and politely knocked on the door. A male voice answered from inside, "Come in." It was Prince Tomas's voice. Fielle's heart skipped a beat. Even though she had known this was probably going to be his room, hearing his voice inviting her to come in made her feel extra nervous.

"Um..." she said. She forced her voice, hoarse with nerves, to sound calm. "It's Fielle."

"Fielle?" The door opened readily enough, and Tomas poked his head out. "Oh, good to see you again." He didn't have a servant with him, Fielle judged, which meant he must have opened the door himself.

Seeing him sooner than she had expected made her heart leap, but that was the only part of her that did. Fielle was not athletic enough for skipping about and frolicking. Sure, everyone else thought she could do anything, but she alone knew this couldn't have been further from the truth, particularly when it came to physical activities. Sometimes even speed walking tripped her up, and as for

running...best if we don't get into that. It was a byproduct of having been sheltered her whole life, Fielle thought. Much to her relief, however, her inadequacies prevented her from acting like a fool in front of the prince.

Then she realized she had no time to be relieved. Here she was, right in front of Tomas, and she had no idea what to say! "Um..." she began. "Uh..." Her tongue tied itself in knots.

"There's no need to stand out in the hall," Tomas said with a gentle smile. "Would you like to come in and talk?"

And thus Fielle was invited to share the break with Tomas. (Lynette, tactfully, opted to wait outside.)

Tomas prepared her a cup of tea. *He's even making me tea*, Fielle thought as she fidgeted on the sofa.

"So, what did you think about the party?" Tomas asked her. He set the cup down in front of her and sat across from her.

Her mind went blank. If she was talking to any other person, she wouldn't even have had to think before giving a socially appropriate response, but now, the words wouldn't come out. "Um..." she began. "S-So, what's going on with you and Ren  eth...?" Wait, how did *that* slip out? *What am I saying?* she panicked. *It is way, way too suspicious to bring her up out of the blue! Oh no, oh no, what do I do now?* Not only was she tongue-tied despite normally being a wonderful speaker, but to pick the worst possible topic on top of that! What if he thought she was weird? What would she do then?

But Prince Tomas only chuckled and gently reassured her in a calm, slow voice. "Oh, you know Ren  eth? She's in a bad situation right now, I hear. She turned down several princes who asked for her hand, so they began spreading awful rumors about her. Now she's being left out because her friends are jealous of her. Everyone gives her the stink eye, and no one will talk to her at parties anymore. When I saw her tonight, I figured I should go up to her and say hi. Sure, she does come off a bit strong, but she's really nice."

This information hit Fielle like a sledgehammer, leaving her dumbfounded. *I am the actual worst!* she thought. *I was judging her based solely on slander. I'm terrible.* All throughout the party, Fielle had entertained feelings of jealousy by

imagining that Ren  eth was some sort of temptress trying to seduce Prince Tomas, but she was completely wrong. The only wicked woman here was Fielle, for all her messed-up thinking. And just like that, she began to cry. She felt horribly guilty even being here and wanted to run away. She was mortified to be such a unsightly person in front of such good people as Prince Tomas and Lady Ren  eth.

Turning red as she cried, Fielle mumbled, "Um, I...I should go now." She wanted to disappear into thin air, even though it made her sad to leave without talking to him more. Also, what was he going to think about her leaving so suddenly? He'd definitely think she was weird now, but she had no other choice. It was better this way. She wanted to be out of there as soon as possible.

Fielle got up to run for the door when her darn clumsiness reared its ugly head and made her trip over absolutely nothing at all. She stumbled and began to fall. Her brain registered that she was falling and then, being no good for anything but worrying over situations like this, launched into imagining what could be going through Tomas's mind right now. Considering how she showed up out of nowhere, immediately made to leave, and then promptly fell over, she figured she knew the answer: Weirdo.

However, Fielle only made it so far as to lurch forward when Prince Tomas grabbed her, stopping the fall.

"Oh man," he said as he almost sighed. "You really are something else." And then, ignoring how tall Fielle was for a girl, he easily pulled her up into his arms. His eyes met hers as he held her like a child. He didn't look disgusted or amused but instead regarded her tenderly.

"You never end up saying what you actually want to, do you? That's not good, you know. People won't know what you mean unless you tell them."

His words took Fielle's breath away. They were like a magic spell. By saying that she couldn't express what she wanted to say, he had expressed Fielle's inexpressible feelings to a T.



He smiled at her gently and prompted her like she was a child. “It’s okay. Here, why don’t you tell me. Funnily enough, when you use your words, everything turns out all right.”

Caught up in the idea and with some difficulty, Fielle began to string her words together—words for herself, not for anyone else around her.

“Um... I...” These words for herself did not come easily. Prince Tomas was so close, and her heart was pounding so fast she thought it might explode.

“I...” And yet, Tomas waited patiently for those words to come with that kind smile of his.

Fielle squeezed her eyes shut and let her own words tumble out without any proper planning. “Prince Tomas... I want... I want to be your friend!” she declared, turning bright red.

Out of breath now, she waited, panting softly, for his response. Tomas gave her an even kinder smile than he had before and said, “Really? Okay, then let’s be friends. Glad to have you as my new buddy, Fielle.”

Fielle and Tomas made arrangements to meet up with just the two of them multiple times afterwards. It had to be the two of them alone because Fielle’s usual followers would only get in the way; however, this was more of a pretext than anything, as Fielle did want to see him one-on-one. Besides, the one time she had tried to go up to him at a party, the whole crowd shifted with her the moment she took a step in his direction, much to the surprise of those talking to Tomas. Seeing this, Fielle gave up on talking to Tomas when anyone else was around. Instead, Tomas arranged as much time as possible for the two of them to meet. No one knew of this friendship apart from Lynette, Fielle, and, of course, Tomas.

Tomas told Fielle fantastic stories, ones she never learned from her history or geography governesses no matter how much they praised her knowledge—tales of ancient stone ruins on faraway southeastern continents, stories of plants and animals living on distant southern islands, accounts of strange folk who lived in lands frozen over by ice. Tomas had seen them all with his own eyes. She asked him how he had come to have so many wonderful adventures,

and he explained that, while Vorland may have been small now, he wanted to broaden his horizons and someday develop the country into a prosperous, industry rich kingdom. This also explained his stint as a potter's apprentice. Tomas's way of life was a far cry from hers, Fielle thought. Whereas all she did was try to live up to other people's expectations, Tomas had a real sense of purpose. How incredible.

Tomas boasted a wide circle of friends as well, an eclectic group of royalty, aristocracy, ministers, artisans, sailors, chefs, and musicians alike. He spoke of one in particular, saying, "He's a really interesting guy. He's wonderful to all our male friends, but he doesn't have the first idea how to treat women. I worry that someday it'll cause a huge problem." This was the king of Orstoll, the biggest kingdom in the center of the continent. It surprised Fielle a little bit that Tomas could talk so casually about such an exalted person.

It was becoming clear to her that she really was in love with Tomas. In the meantime, several princes, kings, and other would-be suitors had come asking for her hand, but she had turned them all down. She knew that as a princess she couldn't simply marry whomever she wanted, but if it were at all possible, she wanted to marry Tomas.

One day, Fielle boldly decided to broach the topic and take the next step towards becoming sweethearts. She was scared to death to declare her own feelings but, to her shock, Tomas said, "I like you too, Fielle." He said this in his normal tone of voice, so for one bizarre moment, she wondered if he really meant it. However, she knew that Tomas wouldn't lie to her. Fielle's doubt turned to happiness. This was the best day of her life.

However, even if Tomas liked her back, one major obstacle still prevented them from marrying: her parents. She knew they would never approve of her marrying the prince of Vorland; therefore, she kept their relationship a secret from everyone but Lynette. She wanted to tell Fie as well, but for some unknown reason, their father had recently started searching for a husband for Fie and forcing her to attend parties against her will. Fie came back from them in a foul mood, so Fielle thought it best to not bring up the subject of a happy love life for the time being. Nevertheless, it became Fielle's first ever real dream for the future to wed her beloved Tomas, with or without anyone else's

approval.

This might have been a bit naive on Fielle's part. She wasn't fully aware of how much people valued their image of her as this Priestess of Healing, nor did she fully understand the gravity of Tomas saying, "I like you too." Fielle was still a teenager, and a sheltered one at that. How would she have had any idea?

A year later, the news reached Daeman that Prince Tomas's carriage had fallen off a cliff. Its passenger did not survive the crash.

When Fielle's story reached this point, Fie jumped in shock. It was wonderful to hear that Fielle had someone she loved so much, and it warmed Fie's heart to see how happy Fielle looked as she talked about Tomas. Because of that, she had completely forgotten there would be no happy ending for Fielle and Tomas—how else would they have ended up in this complicated situation?

"Daeman and Vorland never had much contact with one another," Fielle explained, "but when the news reached us anyway, I was so stunned I took to my bed for days..."

Fie was at a loss for words. What could she even say in response? Of course, hearing about a loved one's death would be a major shock, she thought. Yet since her own feelings were so unclear, maybe she couldn't even imagine how devastating this would be.

Seeing Fie look so concerned, Fielle smiled at her. "Oh no, it's okay," she said. "He lived!"

"He did? That's a relief!"

"I was in a slump for some time due to the shock of it, when I received a marriage proposal from King Roy. I was going to refuse him because I was too depressed to see anyone, but mother and father insisted I meet him. They set up an opportunity for us to meet, and there he said to me, 'Tomas is alive—'"

"Followed by, 'Please, just roll with it,'" Lynette added with an annoyed glare. "Which was all rather ridiculous, as I see it."

"And later on," Fielle continued, "Roy told me everything." According to Roy,

the king of a large kingdom had his eye on her and had discovered her secret relationship with Tomas through espionage, whereupon he issued Tomas a threat. Fearing for his life, Tomas sent a letter to his good friend Roy asking him to take care of Fielle if anything happened to him. Sure enough, the worst came to pass in a suspicious carriage accident, and while he narrowly escaped with his life, Tomas was rendered unconscious. Letter in hand, Roy rushed to the scene, consulted with Tomas's royal father, and issued the news that Tomas had perished in the crash. Then he decided to make the first move to protect Fielle by entering a sham marriage with her. After all, being the king of such a large country as Orstoll, he assumed her parents would accept willingly enough once he offered the proposal. This was the kind of harebrained scheme that only Roy could think up. All of his issues with women became apparent as well, but all the same, it was thanks to him that Fielle was saved from that bad situation. (But was it out of the frying pan and into the fire?)

“Wait,” Fie said, “so does that mean I’m not married to him either?” In Fie’s part of the world, marriages were officiated by the church. There were all sorts of ceremonies involved, but the basic act of wedding two people together was simply a priest blessing an item with the couple’s names written on it. The church then held onto this item as a record of the marriage. In other words, so long as a member of the church was involved, it was possible to completely hoodwink outsiders into believing a fake marriage was legitimate. On the flip side, this system could also be abused; one could be forced to marry against their will if a member of the clergy was ordered to do so. However, such things happened only rarely, as the church would lose support from its followers if such injustice came to light. Still, it wasn’t an absolute impossibility, and someone—maybe even that king from earlier—could still try to force Fielle’s hand.

At any rate, if there was no record of Fie’s marriage and Fielle herself wasn’t truly married, then Fie figured she was probably in the same boat.

Fielle smiled and nodded. “Yes, I’m sure you’re not married either.”

Fie would have to check with the captain later, but all the same, she felt like it was a great weight off her chest.

Chapter 29 — The Peculiar Second Wife

The next day, Fie was out on a walk when she noticed Captain Yore entering the reference room and decided to hurry after him. Fie had taken to strolling in order to pass the time so frequently that she had been nicknamed the Strolling Second Wife. A retinue of maidservants typically accompanied her, but today she was allowed to walk around on her own, provided she stayed on the top floors. Up until very recently, Fie had been able to go anywhere whenever she wanted to as a squire, so she found this arrangement kind of obnoxious. Whenever she wanted to go downstairs, she first needed to return to her rooms and tell the maids. By way of comparison, Captain Yore was always stalking about the place going whenever and wherever he pleased. Fie didn't think this was very fair, but the captain was also incredibly strong and competent, so she did get it. Besides, unlike Fie, he was actually working.

Today's work required Yore to fetch his own documents, which Fie found impressive. Maybe he needed help, she thought. If so, she was just the girl for the job. She slid open the door and walked in, whereupon Roy immediately noticed her and turned to look.

"Heath...?" he said. "No, I mean, Fie?"

"That's me!" Even though she had been silent, he still guessed it was her immediately. That, Fie thought, only went to show how cool he was. Even assassins could do nothing against him, much less Fie.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, but can I help you with anything?"

Roy was apologetic in the face of Fie's unbridled kindness. "No." He paused. "I don't need any help. I just wanted to find the population demographics for the Pol region. Sorry."

Fie waved away his apology and then broached another topic of discussion. "Actually, I was wondering if I could ask you about one more thing."

A request from Fie was enough to excite Roy. “Of course. Ask away.”

“It’s about our marriage. See, I heard that you’re only pretending to be married to Fielle, so I was wondering if we’re not really married either.”

“Uh?!” Roy jolted forward slightly, as if he had been struck.

In the dim light of the reference room, Fie scarcely noticed. She clasped both hands together and held them to her chest, her eyes shining with perfect trust in her captain. “Knowing you, I figure that our marriage is fake, but I wanted to double-check just to be sure.”

“Gah!” Her full faith in him brought him to his knees. He looked like he was in extreme pain.

Fie rushed to his side. “What’s wrong, Captain?” she cried.

Roy crouched on the ground with his face between his knees and finally, after a long pause, muttered, “I’m sorry.”

“Huh?” What was he apologizing for all of a sudden?

Sweat poured down Roy’s face, but he knew that he couldn’t run away. “I’m sorry...” he finally croaked out. “My marriage with Princess Fielle is fake, but yours...is not...”

True, the fake marriage had only been concocted to solve Fielle’s problem, but how in the world had it come to this? The reason was simple, and even now he clearly remembered his state of mind at the time. Back then, his thoughts on Fie first boiled down to, “Eh, whatever,” and later, “How obnoxious.”

Roy had hunted high and low to find a member of the clergy with the power to marry royalty, the willingness to cooperate in faking a marriage, and the lips tight enough to keep it a secret. Meanwhile, every priest in the church clamored to have the honor of wedding the king of Orstoll to the Priestess of Healing, forcing Roy to go through double the effort in coming up plausible explanations to turn them all down as he maneuvered around all the other possible obstacles. The hardest part of protecting Princess Fielle was quite probably orchestrating the fake wedding. Considering all the hassle it took to do this for her, Roy didn’t feel the need to do the same thing for Fie—the unwanted nuisance, to his eye—if he could avoid it. The fewer people involved

in fake marriages, the better. Therefore, the king and queen of Daeman readily accepted his suggestion to hold her marriage ceremony without her presence due to the delay in her departure. Her wedding was thus dealt with in a perfectly bureaucratic manner which, Roy thought, was all that was necessary. Or rather, at the time, the extra expenses incurred by protecting Fielle and the gratitude she should have felt for him shouldering all this marriage nonsense preoccupied his thoughts.

However, having learned Heath's true identity and her whole situation, Roy looked back on that now and thought, "Oh no, I made an awful mistake." If anything, it was only one item in a whole long list of awful circumstances. Fie's parents pushed her into the marriage for money, but not once did he or anyone else ask her about her own opinions on the subject; furthermore, once they were actually married, he completely ignored her and locked her away in her chambers to boot! That was no way to treat a young lady. And later, Roy knew, she ran into more trouble caused by her own actions.

How had this happened? The answer was as plain as the nose on his face—this was, perhaps, the first time Roy had ever reflected on his own life. He had always been so intently focused on looking ahead for the sake of his kingdom and charging forward that he had never once considered his own actions. Roy now deeply regretted this. He had treated Fie rudely because his prejudice against women had clouded his eyes. Granted, this flaw had been pointed out to him multiple times before, but Roy had let it wash over him and simply cast the thought aside until finally it truly came to light. Now he felt horribly guilty and equally remorseful.

Maybe Roy's life had been too calm up until now. Yes, there had been difficult times. Yes, there had been struggles. However, he had always thought that for the sake of his kingdom, his friends, and his subjects, that he'd be just fine, so long as he kept going down the same path as always: learning from past mistakes, studying to make up for shortcomings, and working hard to overcome obstacles. Yet this was Roy's first time encountering a situation he could not resolve. This young girl had been injured by his own prejudice and pride, and no amount of learning, studying, or working hard would undo that.

This girl, the girl he did not know how to face, stood before him and looked

slightly downcast as she murmured, “I see...”

Then, she added, “Well, no use crying over spilled milk. Besides, you worked very hard for Fielle, so don’t let it bother you too much. Okay, Captain Yore?”

Roy’s guilt was obvious in his sweating and somewhat troubled smile, so she tried to encourage him instead. Something about her own smile suggested that she was already used to getting the short end of the stick, and that only drove the blade farther into Roy’s heart, the invisible sword of guilt digging deeper into Roy’s back these days with every step he took.

It was set in stone from the day of his birth that Roy would someday walk the path of kingdom, born the legitimate heir to the throne, to a mother who passed away when he was too young to remember. His father kept mistresses, but his paramours were not aristocrats; the king much preferred toying with airheaded peasant women instead. If he fathered children with them, it was never discussed. Not that it mattered as, regardless, Roy possessed the most legitimate claim to the throne.

From his earliest memories, Roy had grown up with the knowledge that everyone expected him to someday be king. This awareness first came to him shortly after he turned five years old. On that fateful day, Roy and his retinue of servants rode in a carriage through the outskirts of the capital, whereupon he saw a neighborhood populated with tumbledown hovels and emaciated people, a far cry from the splendid mansions and shops outside of it.

“What’s that?” Roy asked one of his servants.

“That, Your Highness, is where the impoverished live. You mustn’t ever go there, or else you might catch an illness.”

Roy ignored the servant, leaped down from the still-moving carriage, and ran into the neighborhood. Alarmed, the servants stopped the horses and chased after the runaway prince.

This neighborhood was indeed a part of Wienne, but unlike in the comfortable middle-class sectors of the city that sat right next door, starvation infested the area. It was a depressing, dreary place, and the people who lived

there walked about with no light in their eyes. These were not the same eyes as those the prince saw on his usual carriage routes.

The servant caught up and, scowling, admonished Roy. “Your Highness, what are you doing? This is very dangerous. We must leave this filthy place at once.”

“My lord father gave me a gemstone for my birthday,” Roy said. “Sell it and use the money to give these people food.”

The servant gasped, at a loss for words.

“Now!” Roy commanded.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!”

Roy immediately looked into the matter and then understood how this neighborhood came to be. His father’s wasteful spending habits were steadily leading his country into an economic decline, but with his habit of distributing money to commoners left and right and hosting frequent parties, the king was by no means an unpopular ruler. Still, previous rulers were, perhaps, more well loved. His constant revelry and unwillingness to take his leadership duties seriously led to the kingdom’s eventual degeneracy. Its treasury declined steadily, and as a result, money could not always go to where it was needed, as such neighborhoods in Wienne and other cities proved. While some merchants were eager to curry favor with the king to turn a profit, others lacked the necessary support to continue their work, and so the scope of the nation’s poverty continued to spread.

The prince lacked the power to fix all of this, so first he decided to appeal to his royal father. Hearing this, his father cried, “Oh, what a valiant son I have! Orstoll’s future is in good hands!” Then the king redoubled his efforts to entertain himself.

After a few more unfruitful attempts to persuade the king, Roy gave up, used what funds he possessed himself to help the impoverished whenever he could, and devoted himself night and day to studying to become the best king possible. The wet nurse who took care of him after his mother passed away shortly after he was born told him, “Your Highness, I want you to grow up and become a wonderful king for me, please.” Roy took her words to heart and

made them his life's goal. *I must become a wonderful king, he vowed, so I can bring my people happiness.*

Roy attended his first party when he was eight. Up until then, he had refused every invitation, insisting he was too busy studying. This surprised Crow, his old friend from early childhood and the closest to Roy in age of Marquess Harbald's three sons. "It's rare to see you at a party," he admitted frankly.

As it turned out, Roy had an actual reason to attend for once, as a famous economist just so happened to be visiting Orstoll and likewise had been invited to this party. *I must talk with him, Roy thought. I want him to answer my questions and give his opinions on my ideas.*

Much to Roy's delight, he discovered the economist shortly after the party began and had just set out to talk with him, when he was mobbed by a crowd of squealing girls.

"Oh my goodness!" cried one. "Is that really you, Your Highness? This is the first time I've ever had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. My name is Marcie, and I am the daughter of Count Shiren."

"My name is Serena, daughter of Marquess Tebes," said another. "We met ever such a long time ago. Do you remember me?"

"Oh, you're as handsome as everyone says!"

"Your Highness! Please, come talk to me too!"

Just like that, his path to the economist was blocked. *What is their problem?* Roy thought. *Why are they in my way?* Roy was puzzled, but the more socially adept Crow looked on with a smile that suggested *well, duh*. He was a prince. What else did he think would happen?

"Go away," Roy told them. "I want to go to talk to that economist."

"Ooh, you know about economics?" Marcie squealed. "Oh my goodness, Your Highness, you're so smart!"

Serena added, "Please, Your Highness, teach me about economics too!"

There was no deterring these pests, and Roy did not have much experience in

talking with girls in general. Studying and taking care of the kingdom as best he could in his philandering father's absence left Roy with no time to find a fiancée. In this gap, even those of lower status threw themselves on him with impunity.

He puzzled over how to get these girls out of his way when suddenly, he heard—

“Forgive me, sir, but I must excuse myself. The carriage back to my homeland will be leaving shortly. I must thank you, as it was a great honor to attend a party with such illustrious guests as our young prince,” said the economist to his aristocratic acquaintances.

One of the aristocrats chuckled. “Take care now.”

With his final farewells, the economist turned and left.

Roy screamed internally. It was a terrible blow to him. Completely ignoring all the girls trying to get his attention, a gloomy voice in his heart muttered, *Girls are nothing but a pain in the butt. All they do is crowd around me and jabber on about those inane things in those shrill voices. Around me! I, who must become a wonderful king! Don't they understand this has repercussions on their happiness as well?* From that day on, Roy relegated every young girl to the same category: an utter nuisance.

To prevent any misunderstandings, it must be said that while Roy did think of girls as awful bothers, he never harassed them, treated them maliciously, or attempted to get rid of them in any way. These girls were his subjects too and as such deserved to be protected. It was only that they were nuisances to him on a personal basis, which meant he didn't feel the need to talk to them or be nice to them one-on-one. Roy began to give all girls the cold shoulder at every subsequent party to the point where he made a princess from the neighboring kingdom cry and was told off by a servant. However, this did nothing to reform his attitude.

Perhaps it was a stroke of misfortune that Roy had no respected older figures to guide him. His uncle probably came closest to fitting the bill, but, since Roy's grandfather had sent him abroad and Roy's father had never rescinded this order, Roy and his uncle's interactions were too few and far between.

Roy's father's wasteful habits continued, and even with his once good reputation, uneasy whispers began to break out. The royal treasury was in dire straits, and other consequences grew as the king's once supported debauchery took its toll on the kingdom. To make matters worse, corruption ran rampant in all levels of the government, and even the people of Wienne found themselves sucked into a world of sin.

The soaring crime rate worried Roy. *I can't just keep studying*, he thought. *Once I become king, I must take the initiative and crack down on these wrongdoings.*

With that in mind, he decided to hone his sword skills and became a pupil of the finest knight in the land. This old knight ran a prestigious school from where he trained many young squires. Roy understood he would not be his teacher's sole student, and from there, Roy experienced normal life for the first time ever. He also finally met someone he could look up to and respect: Zephas, the most talented of all the pupils and now the captain of the 1st knights and commander of the royal knighthood.

Unfortunately, Zephas could not fix Roy's now firmly solidified misogyny either. There was an age factor involved as well, as Roy was always perfectly courteous to older women and quite kind to little girls. However, any girl close enough in age to him to be a potential love interest was immediately scorned. This worried Zephas and his childhood sweetheart to no end.

Roy's father passed away when Roy was thirteen. This was no plot to end the king's life with an assassin's poison or blade; rather, since he died while traveling incognito to revel with the commoners in wine, women, and song, it was evident that his decadent lifestyle finally caught up with him. When Roy heard the news, he felt relieved. The kingdom was entering such a state of disgrace that he feared he might have had to stain his hands with the crime of patricide if the king persisted in living very much longer. Still, with his lifelong dedication to walking the path towards good kingship, such a thought did give Roy pause.

The instant he assumed the throne, Roy began launching a series of reforms.

The degeneracy had reached even the knights, with the second-in-command working arm in arm with gangsters to overlook crime and even support human trafficking operations. Fortunately, none of the young knights Roy studied with had sullied their hands with this corruption; they were all noble young men to the core. Roy deported the second-in-command and all of his cronies before reorganizing the order with Zephas in charge. There, with a knighthood-centric approach, he organized a crackdown on criminal activities and rebuilt the kingdom's finances. The people praised Roy for these positive changes, but Roy himself knew it wouldn't have been possible if not for his brothers in arms.

The squire system also received a slight overhaul. Previously, any commoner with talent could theoretically join the knighthood, but there was still a high barrier of entry. Roy decided to accept a wider pool of applicants so that more of the growing numbers of impoverished children could have healthy opportunities for their futures. Thus, the squire recruitment process became a system where rich or poor alike could join based on their talent. Likewise, squire training became more school-like, partially due to the increased number of squires from poorer backgrounds and partially because Roy didn't think the old method of knights treating their squires like servants had much of a positive effect.

The reforms that began with the knights made great progress, and Roy and his knights became heroes in the eyes of the people. Everyone loved the knights, and since anyone could become a knight, the kingdom quickly set off in a more positive direction. Once Orstoll got back on its feet, the knights who had worked with Roy applied for retirement, claiming that knights weren't meant to keep ruling. Civil officials were meant to govern, they argued, while knights were only for keeping the peace. They couldn't let this nation return to its former state. Roy realized they were right and, leaving only Zephas in charge of the knighthood, began working with officials in place of his former knights.

This did not go especially smoothly. Up until now, Roy had never relied on his ministers due to his knights' sheer talent in political affairs, but this move made Roy busier than ever, to the point where it was almost a one-man show. Fortunately, after repeatedly begging Zorace to return and help govern, Roy's uncle finally broke down and came back. He had sworn up and down that he

would never become chancellor—no ifs, ands, or buts—yet he ended up taking the position anyway.

Orstoll was lauded as a large, prosperous nation by other kingdoms, but the late king's debauchery had driven it to the brink of financial ruin. Roy directed every task involved in running the kingdom, shored up the kingdom's struggling finances, and worked as a knight to root out the last deep-rooted criminal threats. Thanks to his efforts, Orstoll was day by day returning to its former glory, and yet one huge problem remained from his father's negative legacy.

Roy's father had borrowed from other nobles to offset his dwindling supply of fun money and, instead of repaying his enormous debts, created and adopted a law to resign his rights to tracts of land. He did so for the lands controlled by Duke Zerenade and all his vassals, essentially giving them the right to run these lands as their own mini-monarchy. This became a criminal refuge with flagrant drug and human trafficking occurring in broad daylight. To this day, the people of Orstoll referred to this region as the Dark Dominion.

Even if the government were to send in a team of investigators, they were required to give advance notice. Since everyone in the Dark Dominion worked for the duke, they could completely conceal all proof of any illegal dealings before the investigative team arrived. Therefore, regardless of the information sent home by spies, all Roy could do was arrest the tip of this evil iceberg. Then, to make matters worse, connections among the criminals leaked the existence of these spies. Without any official proof that the duke was involved in these crimes, Roy had no way to lawfully seize the rights granted to him. Likewise, if he seized the duke's rights by force, he ran the risk of destroying his relationship of mutual trust with his noblemen. It would likely lead to war and more of the nobility siding with the duke. A war like that could easily split the country. Thus, Roy and his men continued to gather reliable proof in order to sweep away the last of his father's legacy.

Roy lived his entire life looking ahead, because he had a future worth aiming for: a kingdom where every person could live in peace and happiness. He worked towards this goal with a single-minded determination. In some ways, this was a good thing, but in other ways, maybe not so much. He didn't spend

his life looking back over his shoulder and worrying about the past, but this also meant he missed some things that he really should have given a second thought.

At any rate, Roy no longer had the luxury of debating about whether this was a good thing or not, as he was now a wrongdoer. He didn't have the time to worry about his own comfort, as his victim sat before him, grinning away and sipping a cup of tea.

Fie and Roy were sharing tea for two. It had been a week since she was brought to live at the palace, and in that time she and Roy had already met for tea several times. Roy was concerned about Fie's well-being, whereas Fie was simply happy to meet with her captain, so it was in their mutual interest to meet.

For the various witnesses (and of course there were witnesses; this was a castle), the fact that Roy had turned a complete one-eighty from his initial disinterest in Fie and now engaged in clandestine meetings with her was *very* interesting indeed, and all sorts of rumors were born. However, from Fie's perspective, her sole care was that she missed seeing her squire friends, and so she cherished any opportunity to spend time with a dear companion.

Today's conversation had to do with Fie explaining more of the details of her situation.

"I apologize..." Roy said again. It had become a habit at this point.

"I keep telling you, please don't worry about it, Your Majesty," said Fie with an embarrassed smile. This tea party was a nonstop apology fest on Roy's part, and since Fie had already forgiven him, it was getting pretty obnoxious. She wouldn't have minded if it made him feel better, at least, but he sunk deeper into his remorse and self-loathing, his face growing paler, with every apology.

This was not a good trend, as far as Fie saw it. She wanted to encourage him somehow, to start freeing him from his feelings of guilt, but it was not going well. She tried to take another shot at it today and said, "You did this all for Fielle, didn't you? I don't think you had much of a choice in the matter either. Besides, they used to treat me like this all the time back home, so it's nothing new. Don't worry about it."

Stab! There went another blade right through Roy's heart. He ached to think of this poor girl sitting before him who shrugged off her own pain by saying it was "nothing new." Not to mention, here he was adding insult to injury on this poor girl. Fie had no idea, but the nicer she acted, the more Roy could see into the depths of her soul, in all its abused glory. The more she treated him kindly and tried to encourage him, the more the guilt stabbed at him. What a mess.

The two sat in silence for a few moments before Fie put her teacup down with a little tinkle. She scrutinized Roy, wondering what she could do to free him from this situation, as Roy, unable to meet her eyes, agonized over what he could do to make this up to her.

I wish he would stop being so stubborn and have a real talk with me, Fie thought, but she knew that telling him this would do no good. Come to think of it, this might have been the first time in Fie's whole life anything like this had happened. She had been looked down upon and mistreated since birth, but, after coming to Orstoll, had lived through many new experiences: being treated like a friend, being told off after making mischief, and even being cherished. Yet now the same person who had done all of these things felt such guilt for his own actions that, no matter if she forgave him, he refused to accept her forgiveness. Fie had no experience with this sort of thing at all. It was a step beyond forgiving or not forgiving, the crossroads of "he won't think he's forgiven even though I forgave him" and "even if I forgave him, he won't forgive himself." It was a first for both of them. Fie, in her lack of experience in social interactions, awkwardly wondered what to do. Her year with Roy, Crow, Queen, Gormus, and all the rest had taught her the basics, but it was too short a time for her to learn everything.

She could try encouraging him, but all that did was make him sink further into his depression. She could get mad at him, but mad? At her captain? No, that was not happening. Besides, that would be too self-centered. She could cry, but she got the feeling that that would be an utter disaster. She could be cheerful—but would that make her look like a weirdo? Good thing she wasn't one. (At least, according to Fie.) She searched all her past interactions with Crow, Queen, and the rest of the boys but couldn't find an answer.

Just then, Conrad's smirking face, and a suggestion—*make him pamper you*—

came to mind. For some reason, Fie felt like this was the right answer, although, according to Conrad, it was too obviously manipulative of a trick. Her cheeks flushed slightly at the thought of trying to have Captain Yore pamper her. *Acting like a spoiled child on purpose is kind of embarrassing*, she thought. But she had to do her best. Her captain had to feel forgiven.

“Um, Captain...” she began. “I have a favor I was hoping I could ask you.”

Roy reacted with great vigor. “O-Oh, yes! Just say the word, and I’ll do it to the best of my ability!”

Good, his usual liveliness had returned. Even in the midst of her embarrassment, Fie was relieved that this had worked. However, she wasn’t used to relying on other people, so she hadn’t been prepared to actually ask for something. So, she settled on something she *actually* wanted. “Um, you see...I was hoping that I could meet Queen and Gormus and all... You know, my friends from the squires.”

Was that even possible? Fie began to worry that this might be too much for a simple attempt to cheer up Roy.

Roy looked pained. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I can’t let you meet with them...at least for now.”

Great, now they were right back at square one. Fie considered it further and hit upon one thing she actually wanted more. It was her true wish, the one that had come to mind when she asked to see her friends. She had begun this exercise as a means to cheer her captain up, but now she truly felt invested, so, a bit anxiously, she asked, “Um... Captain, I was wondering...when can I return to the north dorm?”

The tea party fell into an unprecedented silence. It was a loaded question. To Fie, the time she had spent in that dorm was the best in her entire life. There she had been treated properly for the first time ever, made her first ever friends, was watched out for by older adults, reprimanded, praised—all the things that she wanted in life. And Roy knew this as well as she did. Even as the main cause of Fie’s misfortune, he was one of the adults who had watched out for her even when she was being a fool, listened to her cheerful reports, and given her advice with a smile. Therefore, he understood her wish so badly that

it hurt. It was a natural thing to want, but the only answer Roy could give Fie was downright demonic. Roy knew that he, himself, was the demon to Fie.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I know I have no right to say this after everything I put you through, but Heath...no, Fie, excuse me. Considering your social standing, there is no way you can return to being a squire. After all, more people are becoming aware of the fact that you are my second wife. For you to return to your life as a squire is...well...impossible.”

Even as he knew this was a terrible thing to tell her, the king in him had no choice but to say it. Ever since he had met this person named Heath, he had endeavored all the more in his government work to make this kingdom a land Heath could live comfortably in. It was as a king that he denied her even the smallest happiness, but it was as Roy himself, he knew, that his actions truly harmed her. Still, for all of that, there was nothing else he could do. He was powerless. Dishonest. A monster.

Even when she heard this, Fie did not blame Roy in any way, but tears began to dribble down her cheeks. “I...see...” she murmured.

Oh no. Roy wanted to curl up and die. He had never felt like this before in his otherwise proud life. He wanted to completely disappear or, even better, smash his head against the wall until he died. However, he couldn’t do that. A king couldn’t do anything so atrociously selfish as kill himself, and besides, he needed to save Fielle too. If, after all this, Fielle couldn’t even be saved, then this was all for naught.

Besides, dying wouldn’t make Fie happy. If anything, it would make her cry. Roy now understood the worried glances he had been receiving for the entire past week. He wanted to die, but he couldn’t. Nor could he comfort her. Even his apologies were only attempts at assuaging his own guilt, and the self-centeredness of this made Roy loathe himself all the more. But there was nothing else he could do... What a mess indeed. He could only stand there like a dummy, utterly helpless, as this girl wept before him.

“I’m sorry,” Fie said, trying to give him advance notice, “but do you mind if I cry a bit?” And for a few minutes, she did just that.

Her eyes were still red even when her crying stopped. She smiled and added,

“I’m sorry. That must have bothered you. I understand, I really do, that I can’t go back to where I was before. Thank you for telling me.”

If it was in the king’s power to do so, she would have asked him to turn back the clock. But to when? Who knew? How far back would she have to go to correct her own foolish path, and would she be able to find happiness? She didn’t know.

Crow broke out into a nervous sweat the moment he saw Roy’s face. “Uh, are you okay...?” he asked.

Roy did not look good. He was constantly pale these days, in a way he had never been in Crow’s recollection. Roy marched to the beat of his own drum (which just so happened to beat many times faster than everyone else’s), so whenever anyone lobbed criticism his way, he shrugged it off and kept going as if nothing had ever happened. He was that kind of person.

Fie was the first girl who had ever driven him to such a state. *Now that’s saying something*, Crow thought. His thoughts drifted to his young mentee, who had turned out to be a girl (surprise!) and the princess to boot. In his very first memories of her, she was in pain, but as the year went on, the ratio of memories in which Fie had acted like a blissful idiot rose dramatically. Even now, he bet, she was probably off wandering around somehow without a care in the world, not even minding her new nickname.

Still, Crow knew there was more depth to Fie than her outward actions betrayed. In fact, it was the simple soul in front of him—not Fie—that was the issue. He was depressed now because he had charged ahead towards his goal, disregarding Fie and hurting her in the process. In some ways, Roy was a hard man to understand but, in other ways, all too easy.

“Come on, buck up,” Crow told him. “I get what you’re going through, but now’s the time to bring your A game.” Maybe this, Crow thought, would be a more effective method of pulling Roy out of his slump.

Over a year had passed since an attempted assassination on Fielle. It turned out that the assassins were not only after Tomas but Fielle as well. After the (unsuccessful) attempt on Tomas’s life, Roy, having received Tomas’s letter,

immediately decided to protect Fielle. There were precious few people who knew the relationship between Prince Tomas and Princess Fielle. The ringleader of this plot, the king of Divine Luciana, had pursued the princess's hand in marriage with the understanding that even if she refused, her parents would probably have pressured her into accepting. To prevent that, Roy had arranged the fake marriage in his usual extraordinarily tactless and utterly absurd way. However, the most absurd part was that it worked. Fielle was safe from the king's clutches.

However, the king's foolishness only rose to a new level, and one day he arranged for poison to be slipped into her tea, thinking (and rather rashly at that) if he could not have her, he might as well kill her. Fortunately, Roy employed a master of poisons in Fielle's staff, and she narrowly avoided falling into the king's hands again.

As a result, everyone around Fielle went on high alert, and those who suspected a culprit on the Daeman side of the incident began to mutter that this was Fie's doing, rooted in her jealousy of her superior sister. Maybe her jealousy was so great that she had tempted that king into hiring an assassin in the first place. (Of course, Fie was completely innocent and had zero connection to the case.)

However, there was another insider apart from the one on the Daeman side. The investigation concluded that the poison had been brought in from Orstoll. Now suspicion turned to Duke Zerenade, the leader of the aristocracy in the Dark Dominion. It was thought that his goal was to, by assassinating the queen, tank the king's popularity, gain support from Divine Luciana, and solidify his right to the Dark Dominion, and seize the power of Orstoll for himself. An investigation on Duke Zerenade commenced, and as it proceeded, it gathered proof little by little of his various other crimes, like slavery and smuggling. The Dark Dominion's days were numbered.

Unfortunately, this did not resolve the case of the attempt on Princess Fielle's life. The original source of this mess was the king of Divine Luciana's foolish, one-sided love. As far as the government was concerned, arresting the duke would more or less resolve the whole case, but Roy and the others, this was now the most critical moment. They wanted to find proof that Divine Luciana

was involved. Also, there was evidence that the duke had not acted alone, but had an insider within the palace. Roy wanted to find that person too.

As a matter of fact, the one suspected of being the man behind the curtain, a.k.a. the palace insider, was none other than Chancellor Zorace. Therefore, none of the information coming out of the investigation was being passed on to him.

Crow figured that this must have been a very complicated situation for Roy, as he looked up to his uncle as a respected figure.

“Yeah, I know,” Crow said. “But come on. If we blow it now, all the one-sided, horrible things you did to Heath—I mean, Princess Fie—to save her sister would be for nothing, right? We have to see this through. No, we *will* see this through...”

Roy made a ghastly expression as Crow’s words blasted him like a bomb. Worried, Crow quickly switched tactics. “A-Anyway, how about we get some lunch?”

“No, I have work to do. Besides, I don’t have an appetite.”

Things were going from bad to worse, Crow thought. Not once had he *ever* heard Roy claim he didn’t have an appetite. Maybe having no one around to guide him was making him depressed. The only thing left from his father, in the late king’s imbecility, was debt, and Roy’s mother passed away when he was too young to even remember her face. Zephas was, perhaps, the closest thing he had to a mentor figure, but Zephas was a commoner. If only there was someone else, a relative, who could get to the core of Roy’s life, a life of one who must walk the path of the king.

Just then, a voice behind them said, “May I ask how you plan to conduct your affairs of state without eating first?” There stood Zorace, carrying a bulky stack of official documents. “A king must always mind his health.”

“My apologies,” Roy said, taking the advice with good grace. “You are correct, my lord uncle. Come, Crow, let us go eat.”

“Sure.” Now that, Crow thought, was at least some relief.

Zorace sighed and then handed his stack of documents to Roy.

“What are these?” Roy asked.

“The documents detailing Duke Zerenade’s wrongdoings, per the investigation you ordered. As it appears to be such a large-scale investigation, I’ve also taken the liberty of arranging the materials such that I was able to find.”

Roy and Crow leafed through the documents, stunned. There was everything Roy wanted: proof of the Duke’s involvement in Fielle’s assassination attempt, a list of the co-conspirators, the plans to overtake Orstoll by colluding with the king of Luciana, and even information on who this king was.

Zorace watched their bewildered expressions. Written there was all the information Roy had wanted. Yes, *all* the information. He knew they wanted everything down to the proof of the connection between the duke and the king. Only a conspirator-turned-betrayer could have provided this proof. Handing in this evidence was tantamount to a confession.

“My lord uncle...” Roy began.

“This was an eye-opening experience for me as well. Perhaps I should have treated you more like family...” Zorace murmured.

As he spoke, his eyes lit upon the figure of Princess Fie who was, for some unknown reason, terrifying her maidservants by attempting to climb a pillar on a second-story balcony.

“I bid His Majesty to do with these papers as he pleases,” Zorace said, and he charged off towards the balcony.

Chapter 30 — When the Little Devil Is Gone

A week after the whole “burning hoop, chancellor, and Heath turning out to be Princess Fie” fiasco, the news of it finally got around to the east dorm and its pair of self-proclaimed geniuses, Rigel and Luka.

“Gormus!” Rigel cried. “Are the rumors true? Was Heath really Princess Fie all along?!”

“For a genius such as myself, it vexes me greatly that laymen’s gossip should happen to catch my attention,” Luka complained. “But consider my attention fully caught! Now, tell me if this is true!”

Why on earth were they asking Gormus, of all people? He told them bluntly, “I dunno.” The fact that they sought out him, out of every squire in the north dorm, made Gormus rethink his social life.

At any rate, Gormus hadn’t witnessed the scene himself and had only heard the rumors, so he didn’t know for sure either. When someone told him that Heath planned to jump through a flaming hoop, it shocked him, and he resolved to give his friend, who was growing to be more of an idiot day by day, a good talking-to. And yet Heath, his friend from the very start of training, was now nowhere to be found. This strengthened the credibility of these rumors.

“Don’t put on airs! Come, tell me the truth!” Rigel insisted.

“It’s terrible! If that little devil turns out to be the princess, then I just know she’ll cause me no end of trouble.”

Completely ignoring the two other boys jabbering away, Gormus thought back on memories of Heath. *What in the world was that kid thinking, joining us?* Gormus wondered. Even now, he still remembered the fierce determination Heath exhibited when taking the exam. It was that same determination which tripped Gormus up and changed his whole way of thinking.

He knew the horrible stories about Princess Fie too. He’d have been angry if he were talked about like that or, at least, he’d have been angry if his friends

were talked about like that. Sure, he wanted to tell off Heath for trying to jump through that hoop, but he also recognized how much Heath longed for positive recognition. Even though Heath seemed happy as a squire, there were moments when Gormus caught him looking almost lonely. Lately, Gormus had begun wondering if, provided that Heath and Princess Fie were the same person, those stories troubled Heath or if there was something Gormus could have done as Heath's friend.

However, that wasn't the only rumor floating around. Not only was Heath really Princess Fie, she was apparently dating Queen as well. Objectively speaking, a young squire having an affair with the queen consort was asking for major trouble, so all the squires in the north dorm immediately zipped their lips. Plus, Gormus figured, given that Queen couldn't tell a lie to save his life, it probably meant the rumors were true—that Heath was Princess Fie and also a girl (which, of course, went without saying).

Objectively speaking, Heath looked cute for a guy. As embarrassing as it was to admit, there had been times when being near him had made Gormus's heart skip a beat, so he didn't feel uncomfortable picturing Heath as a girl now. Yeah, maybe that was why. At any rate, it bothered him less that she was a girl and more that she was apparently dating Queen. Gormus didn't know why this made his stomach turn into knots, and moreover, he didn't want to know. Heath was his friend, and that wouldn't change one bit, no matter if she was a girl, a princess, the queen's wife, or whatever.

Therefore, he simply said, "I dunno."

Rigel stubbornly pressed the issue. "What do you mean, you don't know? Heath is your friend, isn't he? How could you not know anyth—?" He broke off with a yelp as Gormus's fist swung into his face and connected with a solid blow.

"I said, *I don't know.*" Really, he didn't know anything. Even if he did, Heath was his friend—at least, that was how Gormus saw it—and he was not about to go ratting out a friend.

He pictured Heath's face with its usual carefree grin, his friend who was caught up in this whirlpool of rumors. It irritated him. *What happened to you?*

he thought. *Will you ever come back to us?* Gormus sighed.

Even without Heath, life still went on for the boys in the north dorm. It was somewhat unsettling to go about their day-to-day without their resident tiny troublemaker, but the squires kept training as best they could.

In the midst of the other boys, Queen's unease overflowed past his lips and out of his mouth in the form of a sigh. From an outsider's perspective, Queen looked as put together as usual, but the resemblances ended there. His face was blank and devoid of life, his neat hair had sprouted a few wisps in it, and even whatever quality it was of his that reminded everyone of a hunting dog was now gone. Every squire who had seen him for the past two weeks drew the same conclusion—he looked like a pathetic mutt, heartbroken because its owner wouldn't come home.

"Are you okay, Queen?" asked Slad, worried. "C'mon, if something's troubling you, you can always lay it on me. Like you know, whatever's going on with you and He—" He stopped with an "Ow!" as Gees came up behind him and whacked him on the head.

"Give it a rest, will you?" said Gees.

"But come on!" Slad was worried about his friend; that was all. However, he certainly couldn't deny that he was interested in the dynamic between Heath and Queen. But he couldn't help it (according to Slad, at any rate). The boys were all reaching the age when romance became terribly interesting, and now their two close friends were dating.

Slad scooted over to Remie and whispered in his ear, "Hey, did you know that Heath and Queen are dating?" Behind his back, Gees glared daggers at him, clearly thinking Slad was up to no good.

Remie blushed slightly and smiled wryly. "I figured something like that was the case. Heath once indirectly asked me for advice relating to that. But I'm still surprised that Heath turned out to be a princess."

"Are you serious?" Slad cried as he put his head in his hands. He hadn't noticed at all!

“Hey, Slad!” Heslow boomed. “You’re in the middle of training! Get serious!”

“Sorry. But come on, I’m worried about Heath,” Slad fired right back, defiant in his anger. “Look, let’s get real. You’re a teacher. You’ve got to know something about him, right? He’s our friend that we’ve lived with for a whole year, and now we haven’t seen him for over two weeks! Of course we’re going to be worried about him!”

Slad did have a fair point for once, and Heslow pulled a face. The students thought of him as a strict teacher, but he treated them that way because he cared about them. He understood how they were feeling, so he overlooked their whispering.

“There is nothing I can say concerning Heath, only that he is well.” As one who had been involved in Fie’s year as a squire, he was allowed to receive a certain degree of information from the palace. On the flip side, he was also questioned for more information. Heslow also had mixed feelings on the issue, as Heath was the poster child problem kid for the north dorm. He had lectured her (and not just once or twice either) with no idea that she was really the second wife of the king. He often went up to the upper floors of the palace when he was called in for questioning, whereupon he witnessed Heath—no, Princess Fie, rather—acting like a princess multiple times. It wasn’t hard to believe her true identity when she looked like that. (Granted, he also frequently witnessed some decidedly unprincesslike behavior, but that didn’t bear repeating.) It was lucky that the sessions ended without him having to speak to her directly, as he wouldn’t have known how to act.

Heslow decided to compromise and tell the boys how Fie was doing, but they hounded him for more. The north dorm boys, problem children all of them, would not let the matter rest. Even as Heslow raised his hands in an attempt to placate them, questions flew in.

“Does that mean you met with Princess Fie?”

“I heard that she’s been moved to the palace, so where is she living now?”

“How are they treating her?”

“Is she cute?”

“Wait, if Heath was a princess all along, are the teachers going to be in trouble?”

“Oh yeah, think of how many times he thumped her on the head. Wow, imagine hitting the king’s wife!”

“Isn’t that a crime against royalty?”

“Even if she forgives him, I doubt the rest of the elites will be real happy about it.”

“So much for Heslow’s chances of getting a raise.”

The last few comments irked Heslow. “Enough!” he spat. “I am not answering any more questions related to Princess Fie! If you don’t stop, I’ll make you start running your laps all over again!”

At the word “laps” the boys scattered, bringing this impromptu press conference to an end.

In Fie’s absence, Queen went from resembling a sharp hunting dog to looking more like a dispirited mutt.

Remie, ever a compassionate soul, was concerned for him. “I’m worried about him,” Remie said. His eyes grew moist as he watched Queen slumping over his half-finished mushroom and bean soup at the next table over in the mess hall, his defeated eyes unconsciously searching for Fie. It was a tragic sight.

“Yeah, but s’not like there’s anything we can do about it.” Slad, sitting across from Remie, sighed.

If Heath really was Princess Fie, then this was one problem too big for the squires to handle. She was the wife of King Roy, and if they tried anything, the boys would be rebelling against the king they would someday swear fealty to as knights. Besides, there was nothing they *could* do, practically speaking.

Still, they were worried about their friend. It was such a complicated situation. The adults who normally helped them would not side with them on this—if anything, the boys felt like those same adults were intentionally keeping them in the dark. But perhaps this was to be expected.

In the end, any solutions the boys came up with had to be realistic. Gees suggested, “Maybe we should help him take his mind off of it for now.”

Slad lit up. “Okay! How ’bout we invite him to the circus?”

Slad didn’t spare a moment to think this through. Before Gees or Remie could stop him, he bounded over to Queen.

“Hey, Queen!” he called. “Wanna go to the circus? Come on! It’ll be a blast.”

Queen jolted at the word. “The circus?” he repeated. Then, a moment later, he collapsed in his chair, utterly spent. “Fie was looking forward to the circus...” he mumbled.

Slad received several thumps on the head from Gees for this (which was normal) and Remie (which was not). Remie, normally a placid person, was terrifying when he was angry.

“Urgh, my bad... I thought that’d cheer him up, that’s all,” said Slad, already up to his second apology of the day, as Remie and Gees glared at him.

“Hmm,” Remie said. “What can we do to cheer up Queen? I’d like to do something, at least.”

“I wish we had more information,” said Gees. “We have no idea what Heath is up to right now. You know, even if your attempt at it was a total flop, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to give him a distraction. Maybe if we give him enough time, he’ll want to go see the circus later. Apart from that... You and I can come up with something.”

“Great!” cried Slad, enthusiasm renewed. “Count me in!”

Remie glared at him again. “Slad, you’re forbidden from going anywhere near Queen until we’ve come up with a plan.”

Apparently, neither Remie’s “we” nor Gees’s “you and I” included Slad. “Aw, what?” Slad whined, baffled at this exclusion.

Remie stared him down until he finally accepted the reality and mumbled, “Okay, fine.”

Remie sat at his desk in his bedroom and tapped his cheek with his pen as he

worked on homework, trying to formulate a plan. *How can we make Queen feel better? I already asked all the other boys in the north dorm, but they were all useless.* You couldn't count on those boys—absolute idiots, the lot of them, said a harsh whispering voice at the back of his mind. Remie was normally not one to slander anyone, even deep down, but he was justified in this case. After all, when Remie had solicited ideas for cheering up Queen from his dorm mates, a good eighty percent of them were not even written proposals—they were just hunks of meat bought from various food stalls around town. How were those supposed to make Queen feel better? Gees and Gormus were the only people here Remie could count on; they, at least, were taking this seriously.

Suddenly, Remie hit upon a fantastic idea. It wasn't a solution to the issue, but a realization that there was one more person he could ask for help. *That's right*, he thought. *Kerio!*

Kerio had been Remie's opponent in last year's East—North Interdormitory Duel. He had not thought much of Remie prior to the games, but he acknowledged Remie's skill when his perseverance brought their match to a draw. Their schedules did not often align because they lived in different dorms, but they did make occasional shopping trips into town together. Unlike Slad and Gees, who became fast friends with Remie the moment they joined the squires, Remie didn't hang out with Kerio often, but still considered him a close friend.

Remie went to see him the next day after training. He approached Kerio in the yard during one of Kerio's solo practice sessions, but when he asked if they could talk, Kerio said, "I'm sorry. I have a meeting with someone else after this." Oh. That was too bad.

Seeing Remie look dejected, Kerio added, "I can't right now, but I'd be happy to talk with you later. We could do tomorrow, or—oh, I know. How about you sleep over in my room tonight? That way we won't be rushed for time."

"Are you sure?" Remie asked, eyes glittering.

Sleepovers weren't endorsed, but there was no way for the teachers to find out, so they did happen occasionally. Boys in the same dorm sometimes crashed in each other's rooms when they got too involved in their hijinks. However, the boys lived together 24/7 anyway, so it didn't feel special, and,

realistically speaking, they didn't do much at these sleepovers. The practice died out over time.

That said, spending the night at a different dorm was a whole other story. Each dorm had a slightly different layout, and sleeping in a different location was always exciting. As a result, cross-dormitory friends sometimes did spend the night in each other's rooms.

Remie, with his small circle of friends (and maybe it was small because his soft appearance made it harder for him to mingle with the others), longed to have a sleepover at another dorm. He forgot all his concern for Queen in an instant.

"Sure," said Kerio. "Just know that my room's kind of a mess."

"I don't care!" Remie cried.

And with that, Remie's plans for the night were made.

After returning to the north dorm for a bath and dinner, Remie knocked on Kerio's door with an overnight bag over his shoulder, a huge stuffed animal in both arms, and a slightly nervous look on his face.

Kerio saw who it was and opened the door. "Glad you could make it," he said. "Come on in."

"Th-Thank you for having me," Remie mumbled, gingerly poking his right foot over the door frame. His left foot crept in after it. Once his whole body was inside, his true delight made itself known, a smile spreading across his face.

"I'll go bring us some tea," Kerio said.

"Oh, I'll come too," Remie said, immediately popping right back out the door.

"No, it's fine. Make yourself at home."

But as Kerio tried to encourage Remie to stay, Remie cried, "I'll go!" In his excitement over his first sleepover, he was being unusually assertive.

"Okay," said Kerio. "How about we go together?"

"Sure."

The two set off for the east dorm lounge. The east lounge turned out to be, to Remie's mind, rather peaceful. (Probably because the boys in the east dorm

tended to be calmer than those in the north dorm.)

The second they saw Kerio, a couple of boys at a table called, “Kerio, would you like to play a board game with us?”

I had a feeling he’d have a lot of other friends, Remie thought. Oddly, he felt almost jealous.

“Sorry, not tonight,” said Kerio. “A friend from another dorm is staying over.”

The boys were astonished. “You have friends in the other dorms?”

Remie giggled to himself in delight. *He called me his friend.*

The boys craned their necks to see Remie standing behind Kerio, whereupon the light of recognition dawned on their faces.

“Oh,” said the first boy. “Him.”

“Ah,” chorused the second. “Him.”

“Uh-huh,” said the third boy. “Him.”

This made no sense to Remie. What did they mean, “him”?

He leaned in to whisper into Kerio’s ear. “What’s this ‘him’ thing about?” he asked.

“Oh, probably that,” Kerio said, and he pointed to one of the walls. There hung a portrait of Remie and Queen. The kicker...was that they were both dressed as women.



“Wh-Wh-Wh-What is that doing here?!” Remie screamed as he ran up to the awful thing. His cheeks flamed even as the rest of his face blanched. He hurriedly tried to block out the part which showed him, never mind the fact that it was too late, and that Kerio must have seen that picture hundreds of times already.

One of the boys at the board game table said, “We bought this from that guy in the north dorm. You know, the small one.”

The second added, “He came up to the dorm one day in disguise with that painting and asked us if he could sell it since he was broke.”

“I mean, the subjects are cute, and the art’s not bad,” said the third boy. “So we all pitched in to buy it off him.”

Remie groaned. “Heeeeeeeeeeeath!” The absurd final parting gift of the absentee princess (whose disappearance had been cause of Remie’s trip to the east dorm in the first place) made even mild-mannered Remie’s blood boil.

“This painting was made without my permission!” He snarled. “I’m taking it back! I’ll see to it that you’re repaid, but please give me some time for that!” Now he *really* needed to get a hold of Fie!

However, the board game boys frowned as Remie furiously grabbed hold of the picture frame. “Are you really taking it back...?” they asked.

This unusual reaction from its unusual source gave Remie pause. “Huh?” he said.

“The thing is, we’re really fond of it now...”

“See, at first we hung it up as kind of a joke because it’s a portrait of Queen,” another boy added, “but after a while, we started feeling like the way he looks at us is kind of encouraging, you know?”

“Yeah, and it makes us work harder during our daily training. We’d really miss that picture if it was gone.”

“Huh?” Remie said. It turned out he had gained fans without even knowing it. That is, fans of him dressed as a woman.

Remie was a people pleaser, so this put him in a pickle. He wanted to

repossess that hateful painting out of embarrassment, but he couldn't bring himself to do that in front of the other boys' innocent, sorrowful faces. Torn between these conflicting desires, Remie turned to Kerio.

"K-Kerio, what do you think I should do?" he cried. Why he asked Kerio, of all people, was a mystery, but Remie needed advice from *someone*.

Kerio didn't know the full situation, but he rubbed his chin and nodded thoughtfully anyway. "I like that painting too," he said. "It's like I get to see you every day."

Remie let go of the picture frame and said, "Th-That's good." (Remie wasn't exactly sure what he meant by this either.) "Maybe I'll just let it be...for now."

The board game boys cheered.

After being sidetracked by the shenanigans in the lounge, Kerio and Remie finally made their tea and returned to Kerio's room. In his initial nervousness, Remie hadn't had the presence of mind to pay much attention to the room, but he had now relaxed enough to take in his surroundings. Kerio's room was just like Remie had imagined—very boyish, neat as a pin, and with few decorative elements. However, there was one item that didn't match Remie's mental image of Kerio's room, and Remie spotted it immediately.

It was a stuffed teddy bear sitting on top of a small bureau. "I-Is that...?" Remie asked. This bear looked like it belonged in a girl's room, but it was one of a matching set that Remie had purchased on his first ever shopping trip into town with Kerio. Its partner was the stuffed animal that Remie had brought with him tonight.

"You put it up!" Remie cried in delight.

Kerio smiled back. "Yeah, since you said I should get it." Sure, Remie had, but at the time he wasn't sure if Kerio would like it. That Kerio did, or at least enough to display it in such a good place, thrilled Remie. He giggled internally and sat his stuffed animal down next to Kerio's bear. The two teddy bears now sat side by side, their cream and dark brown colors almost matching Remie and Kerio's hair. Remie grinned as he admired his handiwork.

Suddenly, Kerio prompted him with, “You said you wanted to talk about something, right?”

Remie jumped. “Oh yes! True!” That’s right, he had come here to ask for advice, but it had completely slipped his mind.

He smothered his smile as he turned around. He had to be serious now for Queen’s sake, he told himself. He sat down, folding his legs in a girlish pose out of habit. Kerio, meanwhile, sat facing Remie with legs akimbo and composed in his usual expression.

First, Remie filled Kerio in on the Queen and Heath situation. Queen and Heath’s circumstances weren’t ones to be talked about willy-nilly to just anyone, but Remie knew that he could trust Kerio. It took a long time to explain, but Kerio listened to it all earnestly, just like he did whenever Remie talked about his stuffed animals. Remie liked that about him.

“And that’s what happened,” Remie concluded. “Although it’s all just rumors, so I don’t know any of the details.”

“If that’s all true,” said Kerio, “you’re right that it’d be a challenge for a squire to sneak in as a spy. I think you’ll need someone else’s help.”

“Yes, I agree. But the thing is, none of the older knights are willing to help us.” Normally, the adults were on their side, but this time they stymied every move Remie and his friends took. They weren’t doing it to be mean, but... Well, no matter how grown-up the squires felt in their second year of training, they were so powerless right now they might as well have been children.

Seeing the gloom descend over Remie again, Kerio asked, “Why don’t you ask the maids for help?”

“The maids?” Remie repeated in surprise.

“Yeah, they must have a good idea about what’s going on in the palace, don’t you think? They might know something about this, and at the very least they can get into the palace more easily than we can. If all goes well, they might even do our spy work for us. And we squires have a special way to talk with the younger maids. You know what I mean. *That.*”

“Oh! Now that you mention it, it makes sense!”

Kerio was right. The maids were in the optimal position to scope out the palace and collect information. Plus, there were definitely several candidates who would be likely to help, and there was a line of communication between those maids and the squires already. However...

Remie flushed slightly as he looked long and hard at Kerio. Kerio began to sweat under this visual cross-examination.

“Just to get it out of the way, I’ve never attended That before,” Kerio explained. “Sorry, but I won’t be any help here.”

“O-Okay, I see.”

“That” referred to having a tea party date with the maids. The boys in the north dorm had longed to partake in such an illustrious event ever since their first year of training. Their ulterior motive was nothing so wholesome as a love of tea but rather a desire to meet girls and get chummy with them.

When, after multiple failures and setbacks, the boys achieved their dream, the numerous demands from the female side of the equation meant that the east dorm boys ended up mixed into the bunch in subsequent iterations of this event. However, not every boy participated. Like Kerio said, he didn’t have any interest in these events and as such never participated—even if he was invited every time. (Incidentally, Rigel and Luka were never invited, as they would make the event a nightmare.)

Remie, also a member of the uninvited crew, laughed bashfully. “Actually, I haven’t either,” he confessed. He wondered why, but it always seemed like he was left out of the group. Remie didn’t want to go per se, but it still hurt.

Knowing that Kerio hadn’t been either made him feel better, but that also threw a wrench in things—neither Kerio nor Remie had any contact with the maids. Unfortunately, Gormus, Slad, and Gees were also in the camp of nonattenders. The only two people in their friend group who ever attended were Fie, ever the curious cat, and Queen, ever the dog trailing her. But those two were at the heart of this issue. One was absent, thereby causing this whole affair, and the other needed cheering up, thereby creating the purpose of this operation. So that was a bust too.

Seeing Remie looking stumped, Kerio said, “I can try looking for someone who

has contact with the maids.”

“Oh, no. It’s fine. You already heard me out and gave me this great idea, so I’ll try the rest on my own now. There’s no one in my immediate friend group that will work, but I’m sure it’ll work out if I broaden my search a bit.”

Kerio was a good listener and gave serious advice. *Yeah*, Remie thought, *I really do like him a lot*. Hearing Kerio call him a friend in return, inspired Remie to do his best, lest he let Kerio down.

“Okay,” Kerio said. “But if you need my help, know that I’m here for you.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Their conversation afterwards turned to other subjects before they eventually turned in for the night. The next morning, Remie changed from his pajamas into his squire uniform as Kerio sat beside him reading a book. Remie needed to get up early this morning to make it back to the north dorm in time while Kerio had no such need. However, Kerio got up early anyway and made tea for Remie before he left.

The tea had cooled down enough for Remie to drink while he was changing. Holding the cup in both hands, Remie tentatively began, “Um... I think...” It felt weird to leave this early with a casual “bye.”

“Hm?” said Kerio.

“I’ll...see you again soon...” Why in the world had *that* been what he landed on? Remie turned bright red in embarrassment, his last words trailing off into a whisper.

Yet Kerio only smiled back in response. “Oh, sure. Take care now. See you soon.”

“Uh-huh.”

As he left Kerio’s room, Remie broke out into a smile as well.

Remie was not the type to reach out to people on his own, but he later worked up the courage to ask if he could arrange a meeting with the maids. The other boys were shocked at first but soon realized what his goal was and readily

agreed to help. Now things were looking up, Remie thought, and it was all thanks to Kerio.

However, when he met with the maids and broached the topic, one maid said, “Let me see, what *do* I know about Princess Fie...? We’re all new girls, so we’ve never had a chance to meet her. We could try to break in and see her, but some of the other girls already broke the rules about that, so now the senior maids are really cracking down on us.”

“I see,” Remie said, disappointed. He hadn’t expected this response, but oh well. Back to the drawing board. “Sorry for the unreasonable request.”

Seeing Remie in such a state distressed the girls. He was so handsome that he had, surprisingly, quite the gang of secret admirers. Less than wanting to date him, exactly, many of them wanted to be his friend or even simply lay eyes on him. The maids all hurriedly began to offer their best eyewitness reports.

“W-We have seen her from a distance, though!” one of the maids said. “I didn’t get a good look since she was too far away, but I thought she was cute!”

“Right! And she looks quite small! Smaller than me, I think,” another added.

All the information they had ran in this same vein, but the girls had tried their hardest to think of anything. “Thanks,” Remie said, and he gave them a smile for their efforts.

However, one girl among them hadn’t said a peep so far. She was the youngest of the bunch and had spent the whole time staring at Remie in confusion. Finally, she worked up the courage to speak and said, “Um...you’re looking for Heath, aren’t you?”

This shocked Remie. He had only mentioned Princess Fie, the new arrival in the palace, but this girl guessed correctly that he was actually searching for his friend Heath. Little did Remie know, but this was the very same girl Heath had once saved from being picked on by some of the older maids.

One of the girls spoke up from the group, saying. “Where’d that come from, Arcia?” The speaker was none other than Arcia’s old tormentors, but the bullying had now taken place over a year ago. Seeing Arcia looking so distraught, this girl was simply worried for her coworker.

Remie stared at Arcia and, for a minute, did not know how to respond. However, seeing Arcia looking so serious, Remie steeled himself as well and said, “Y-Yes, that’s correct.”

Arcia looked down and remained silent for a moment. Finally, she declared in a voice filled with conviction, “The girl in the palace known as Princess Fie is actually Heath.”

“Huh, what do you mean?” one girl cried.

“Heath is that cute boy from the north dorm, isn’t he?” another asked. “You know, the mischievous one.”

“You mean that *he’s* Princess Fie...?” said a third maid in bewilderment.

“Is that true, Arcia? We only saw her from afar. We can’t be sure—”

“No, I’m sure,” Arcia said. “That’s Heath. I don’t know what he’s doing in a place like this or why he’s being called Princess Fie, but I’m sure that he’s Heath. I would know him anywhere.”

This stunned the maids into silence. They looked at Arcia with wide, doubtful eyes.

Remie decided to tell them all the truth. “It’s kind of complicated, but... I’m trying to get in contact with Princess Fie—I mean, Heath—because he’s my friend. So I was hoping, if any of you would be willing to talk to him...” While Remie and the others couldn’t do it, maybe the maids would have more luck. He wasn’t sure how much they could do, but he hoped that whatever it was would lift his spirits.

“I don’t know...” one of the girls said.

“I don’t think we can do that...” another added.

“We’ll be in huge trouble if we get caught...”

Arcia alone looked Remie in the eyes as the other girls made their excuses. Her stare was almost daunting. He gulped and tried to return her unwavering eye contact.

She asked, “Heath is important to the person you’re worried about, isn’t he?”

Remie did not know how to answer, but he nodded. "Yes, very much so. I think he's more important to Queen than anyone else in the world." He must have been, or else Queen would not have been in such a state, thought Remie. He knew this very well from all the time he had spent watching over the two of them. They, in turn, were likewise important friends to Remie.

Arcia was silent for a few seconds and then nodded. "Very well. Then I will do my best."

"Arcia?!" a maid cried.

"B-But it's dangerous..." another of her friends added. All of the older maids were worried for her, but Arcia's determination was unmoved.

"I understand exactly how he feels," Arcia said, "so I want to do this." The maids fell silent. "Please tell him to write Heath a letter, and I'll do my best to get it to him somehow."

"Thank you, Arcia," said Remie. He gave her a deep bow.

Queen's depressive spell continued unabated as he sat in a chair in the lounge, staring off into space. Fie occupied his thoughts completely, in particular the memory of the time she wore women's clothing for him in his room. He had been begging her to see this ever since the occasion in which she made him cross-dress, and finally his wish had come true.

"Give me just a sec," she had said. Queen sat on the bed, staring intently at the wall. There was a rustle of clothing behind him.

Fie was changing. Into women's clothing.

It was on a day off, when hardly anyone was left in the dorm; everyone else had gone off on outings or was out helping the older knights. It was the best time for Fie to cross-dress...wait. It was the best time for Fie to dress like the girl she was, rather.

However, the issue was this: where would she change her clothes? Fie didn't want anyone to see her looking like a girl for as long as she lived in her boy disguise, which meant that going anywhere else to change, even somewhere

close by, was out of the question. Fie couldn't change by herself while Queen stood outside either, as that could cause trouble. This meant that, if Queen wanted to see Fie as a girl, he would have to stay in the same room as her while she changed. After fretting over this for several days, he resolved to go through with it and was made to sit stiffly on the bed and stare at the wall like his life depended on it.

His sensitive ears picked up on the sounds of his crush changing. Queen was a teenage boy, and he couldn't pretend that what was going on behind his back did not interest him. The tantalizing (and certainly age-appropriate) idea of turning around to get a look—although this was terribly wicked—danced in his mind. Nevertheless, his loyal doggy nature (although he himself never thought of it this way) demanded he stare at the wall and never, by no means ever, look back.

Yet even the sight of the bare wall in front of him was enough to inflame his cheeks.

Meanwhile, Fie began casually calling out to him things like, "Hey, Queen, aren't you getting tired of sitting like that?"

"I am not."

Or, "Urgh, it's so hard to get this thing closed."

"I won't look."

She took her sweet time getting changed. Then, finally, Queen's ordeal came to an end.

"Oh Queen, I'm dooone," she sang.

The words were barely out of her mouth when Queen snapped around and drank in the sight. Fie wore a blue dress and had brushed her hair out into a more feminine style. *She's adorable*, Queen thought. His heart skipped a beat.

In her typical devil-may-care way, she lifted each arm and turned all about, double-checking that everything was in its place before turning to Queen. "It feels kind of weird since I'm out of practice," she said. "It's been five months since I've worn this."

Lost in the haze of ogling Fie's beautiful grin, it took the befuddled gears in Queen's brain a few minutes to turn and register what she had said. Wait. What?

"Five months?" he asked. Apart from this, what other opportunity did she have to dress like a girl?

"Yeah, I wore this into town with Sir Crow," she said.

You went to town...with Sir Crow...? Queen thought. Crow had beaten Queen to the punch of seeing Fie dressed as a girl—and while on a trip into town, no less! Sir Crow deserved respect as Captain Yore's second-in-command, but Queen still turned green with envy at the thought.

Even now, back in the lounge, Queen could still feel that pang of jealousy. Just then, he realized that Remie was standing in front of him.

"Queen, are you all right?" Remie was saying.

"Y-Yeah, sorry. Were you talking to me?"

"Yes. This is the third time I've tried to get your attention."

Queen had been too caught up in his memories to notice any outside voices. It went to show how much he cared for Fie.

"Sorry," Queen said. "What's going on?"

Remie looked around to make sure no one was listening and then whispered, "Nothing's going on, but there's something I can't talk about here. Can you come with me?"

"Sure," Queen said. He followed Remie, confused.

Remie led them back to his room, where Gees and Slad awaited them. As Remie detailed his meeting with the maids it dawned on Queen that his friends were worried about him. Furthermore, Remie explained, he had asked the maids for their help, and one maid promised him to do her best to act as a go-between for the boys and Fie. If she was successful, then they would have a chance to speak to Heath again. Therefore, Remie asked Queen to write a letter of all the things he wanted to say to Fie.

Queen's eyes widened. *I can speak to Fie again!* he thought. He pictured his

favorite girl in the world. Then, he swallowed and said, “I’m sorry. I appreciate your intent, but I think it’s better if I refuse.”

“Huh?!” Slad cried. However, Remie and Gees looked like they expected this might happen.

“I don’t want to cause the maid any trouble,” Queen said. “And if she finds Fie, I’ll end up causing Fie trouble too. After all, she’s...already married to King Roy...” His face twisted in pain on these last words. “So I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Of course Queen wanted to see Fie, especially considering how depressed he was in her absence, but he put on a brave face, and came to this admirable decision instead. However, to the other boys’ eyes, this wasn’t admirable. It was heartbreaking. They knew exactly how much Queen cared for her.

Queen gave them a rare smile and said, “I’m grateful you did this for me. Thank you. By the way, you asked me the other day if I wanted to go to the circus, right? Is that offer still open?”

“Y-Yeah, for sure!” said Slad. “It’ll be here at the end of the month, so let’s go!”

“Sure...” said Gees.

“U-Uh-huh,” said Remie.

Remie and the others all knew that Queen was only putting on a show for them. This was a fake smile, one that he hadn’t cared enough to show before. The old Queen would never have been able to do that, as in his general awkwardness, he wore his heart on his sleeve, showing all of his emotions—the good, bad, and ugly alike—in perfect honesty. Yet Queen had begun to change, little by little, after meeting Fie.

The boys reaffirmed their friendship in her absence, but a week later, a disturbing rumor came to light.

As Queen left Remie’s room, he ruminated on the fact that a full month had passed since he had last seen Fie. Maybe this was a short time to the other boys, but it felt like an eternity to Queen. He hadn’t ever been apart from her

for so long. His heart ached for her.

Truthfully, he had wanted to take Remie and the others up on their offer. He wanted to speak to Fie again, even if it was only through letters.

Queen began to walk down memory lane again. Their first meeting was, looking back on it, too mortifying to even want to remember. And then there was the whole debacle when he accidentally saw her in the bath. When she swore him to absolute obedience, he had wondered what he had gotten himself into. However, when she invited him to gatherings with the others to help him feel more at home in the north dorm, he realized later on that he was the one who truly benefited in their agreement.

Honestly, he couldn't recall the moment he had first developed feelings for her. Once he learned she was a girl, his heart began to beat a little faster every time he saw her. But that wasn't why he liked her. He liked her because, among a whole other host of reasons, she was so cute when she smiled, she tried her hardest in everything, and was, even in her moments of duplicity, a kind and gentle soul.

What should I do now...? he wondered. According to rumor, Fie and King Roy were now getting along famously. Now that she was returned to her rightful place as his wife, pretty soon she might forget about Queen entirely. Once she thought about it, she'd realize that there'd be no point in returning to Queen. Since she was already married, dating Queen was the same as having an affair, and Queen wasn't even a full knight yet; compared with the king, he was practically a child. On the flip side, King Roy was mature and attractive. Sure, having a first wife presented a bit of an obstacle, but maybe he was so smooth that he could pull it off. After all, Fie herself had said she got along well with her sister, and those who frequented the castle insisted the rumors claiming the twins had a bad relationship were false.

If Fie was happy where she was, then this spelled the end of Queen's chances with her. He wasn't sure how their relationship even *could* continue, now that everyone knew who she really was. He wished he could run away with her, like in the fairy tales about knights and their princesses he loved so much. Yet in the end, he was still a complete child. He was no brave knight worthy of standing at a princess's side.

“There’s going to be an insurrection? Are you serious?”

“It must be that Duke Zerenade’s doing. This can’t end well...”

The lunchtime mess hall was awash with the news—Duke Zerenade was preparing for an insurrection. Duke was the highest noble rank in Orstoll; a duke’s power could rival that of the king’s. In some cases, a duke even ruled over their own miniature kingdom known as a duchy. Orstoll’s monarchy was relatively strong compared to other nations, but even then, Roy could not afford to ignore his vassals. If the majority of his nobility defied his royal rule, the kingdom would descend into absolute chaos.

The news that Duke Zerenade was amassing troops for a rebellion spread like wildfire before the kingdom could make any sort of official announcement about it. Even the politically uninformed squires considered Duke Zerenade a total persona non grata. Rumor had it that all criminal activity still present in the kingdom could be traced back to him, so deep was the corruption from the previous king’s heyday. It was said that even some knights of that era sold their skills out to the gangs of the time. Even after Roy succeeded the throne and removed those elements from the order, criminals still lurked in Wienne, troubling the knighthood.

The boys of the north dorm had mixed reactions to the news. Some were concerned, whereas others were in high spirits.

“I wonder if this will lead to war,” said one of the boys.

“Do you think we’ll get to fight too?” his friend said.

“I sure hope so!” said another boy. “They hurt my granddad!”

“Don’t be stupid,” a third chastised him. “We’re only squires.”

Remie and his friends sat eating their lunch in one corner of the mess hall. “This smells like trouble,” Remie said. He and the others had spent the whole past month worrying over Fie, but now they had a bigger issue on their hands.

Gormus folded his arms and said, “Well, we all knew it was a matter of time before it happened.”

King Roy had expected this for years, as Duke Zerenade's power and influence had swelled rapidly under the late king's rule. It was obvious to even a child with the slightest interest in politics that this opposition was imminent.

"How did this happen?" a boy at a different table asked.

"Good question," said his seatmate. "I have no idea."

"Yeah, me neither."

(Apparently, the north dorm boys were in the uninformed minority.)

"If a sudden rebellion breaks out, I wonder what the king will do..." Remie said.

Yes, King Roy did want to avoid war, but not because he could not win. It was only the most prudent action to take, especially considering how the late king's wanton spending and unskillful handling already nearly did lead the kingdom into civil war. In a sense, it was less a question of winning and more a matter of minimizing damages and casualties.

By way of comparison, Duke Zerenade's actions were all much too rash. According to the information available at this preliminary stage, he could not possibly amass enough military power to stand any chance of winning.

"Hmm," said Slad. "I dunno what's gonna happen either. That's a good question."

"You don't have to force yourself to participate in this conversation," Remie told him.

"Ouch! How come you're so mean to me lately?"

"Well, what I think is most likely," said Gees, talking over Slad's head, "is that the duke will end up trapped and get desperate. You know, something like that."

"Now you're ignoring me too!"

The kingdom's official announcement came two days after that conversation. It was all information that the boys already knew or had predicted so far, like the fact that King Roy had obtained proof of the duke's connection with the

organized gangs, that those left in Orstoll who had assisted in his unlawful doings had now been detained, and that most of the nobility had declared in favor of the king.

However, there was one new fact which shocked them: Roy and Fielle's marriage was fake, a temporary measure to prevent an attack on Fielle's life from the duke. Not only was she not married to Roy, but she wasn't even in love with him. In fact, she loved a completely separate person and only pretended to be married to protect their partnership. The king apologized to his people for the deception and, to prove his credibility, had this proclamation stamped with the seal of the priest who performed their ceremony.

This caused an enormous stir among the citizenry and, of course, the squires.

"Queen Fielle isn't actually married to King Roy?!" the boys spluttered. "No way!"

Everyone knew they were the image of a loving married couple, but that, apparently, had never been true. The boys had fully bought into this story and were mind-blown.

After all the fuss died down, the real issue dawned on one of the boys. "Wait a minute, if King Roy and Queen Fielle aren't married..."

The other boys then realized it too.

"The king has another wife..." one murmured.

"Yeah, and she's our friend," another said. "And considering *she's* married to the king..."

This friend they mentioned in such incredulous tones was King Roy's "second" wife, the one who sparked completely different kinds of rumors than Fielle. To the squires, she was their resident little devil, the infamous number one troublemaker of the north dorm.

Everyone pictured this slight boy—girl, rather—with her short haircut.

"Wait, so... If the king's not actually married to his first wife, does that make his second wife his...first wife again? I guess?"

They all tried to imagine their friend Heath standing in Queen Fielle's shoes.

Even if someone cleaned her up and put her in a queenly dress, they knew she would still be wearing one of her devious, most unqueenly grins as she cooked up some new diabolical scheme. The boys put their heads in their hands as one.

“You mean *she’s* our queen?!” one yelled.

Another cried, “This is going to end so poorly!”

Just then, there was a huge thud as someone at the rear of the group fainted. The squires turned and saw exactly who you would expect—Queen.

“Hey, Queen, are you all right?!” a boy yelled.

“Hang in there, man!” said his friend. “There’s still hope!”

“Yeah! You may have been doomed from the start, and it may be even more futile now, but there’s hope all right!”

The squires had good intentions, even if the execution was lacking.

Queen had little hope that Fie would ever return to him, but at least the story had gone that Roy was in love with Fielle. Fie was, as everyone knew, a third wheel in their relationship. But now this announcement turned the tables; there were no obstacles in the way of Fie pursuing a relationship with Roy. Plus, according to reports from the palace, Roy and Fie were thick as thieves. Roy, it seemed, was looking out for her in many ways, and Fie had likewise taken a shine to him.

Queen knew Fie wasn’t the kind of girl to be impressed by someone’s rank, but she could be swayed by a cool, older man giving her attention. Frankly, Queen had worried over this very thing numerous times after watching her interact with Sir Crow, even after they began dating.

But the most lethal factor (*too* lethal, really) was that Fie and Roy were already married. Queen was a fool for even worrying about it anymore. Not to mention, he hadn’t seen her or talked to her in months.

Queen shakily rose to his feet and muttered, face pale and haggard, “Yeah, I’m okay. I’m still going to try to be the best knight that I can, even if she won’t ever love me again. Besides, if I do well enough for myself, maybe I’ll be chosen as a member of her guard so that I can at least still be with her.”

The boys were a little taken aback, but Queen's lonely, besotted vision of the future tugged on the squires' heartstrings.

You'll still be with her, even if she won't love you? one thought.

That's brave, thought another.

But in some sense, thought a third, *that's so tragic. It's worse than giving up.*

Even the squires were tasked with helping suppress the duke's insurrection, although their job largely boiled down to acting as porters. It fell to them to load the wagons with the knights' and soldiers' belongings and equipment that was to be taken to the front lines.

It turned out that the top military officials knew about the insurrection long before the news was announced, and they immediately formed a defense force for the capital, thus securing Wienne's safety. Comparatively, Duke Zerenade's attempts to assemble a rebel force were proceeding poorly, which indicated that he would be stuck in this phase for quite some time. Roy's side was presently amassing the perfect army, complete with full arms and armament, to suppress the insurgent force. The squires' duties were just one part of this preparatory work.

Once they finished for the day, Remie and his friends went off into town.

Remie sighed as he looked around him. "It's so calm around here, you'd never know we were on war's doorstep."

"You can say that again," said Gees.

It wasn't the tension that had Remie sighing—it was the complete lack of it. Children ran through the streets as peddlers displayed their wares for the discerning eyes of female shoppers. It was a typical, peaceful day in Wienne, but the boys were on edge, made keenly aware of the discrepancy in mood between themselves and the civilians.

"Well, I suppose it makes sense," Remie said. "The king's army far surpasses the duke's, thanks to His Majesty's vassals declaring in favor of the king. The only members of the aristocracy who declared for the duke are those next to

his duchy or those whose hands are too tied up in crime to have any other option. Maybe it won't even escalate to fighting."

Gees laughed. "I wish," he said. "But either way, this means our plans to visit the circus are off the table."

"Damn shame," Slad added.

Even while the common folk continued to go about their daily lives, the squires had a duty to participate in the war effort, tasked with running logistical support. Judging by when the army was scheduled to march, the boys did, in fact, have time to sneak in a quick visit to the circus—although just barely—but they were obligated to protect the people of Wienne, not play around on the job. Besides, they owed it to the older knights fighting on the front lines. Now was the time for self-discipline, and ignoring even the long-awaited circus.

Slad was truly disappointed, but he spotted a cart selling steamed potatoes and perked right back up.

"Hey," he said, "those potatoes look great. Let's go check them out!"

Gees sighed. "Look at this kid, never taking anything seriously. He's no better than half the people in Wienne."

Remie forced himself to laugh. "Yes, you're right."

"I wonder what'll happen when the war breaks out," Gees mused.

Even though the whole city seemed so calm, the squires, bound for the actual battlefield, felt differently. It was unnerving. Maybe one of their friends would be hurt or end up in some other danger. Even now, the knights were out on the front lines. Maybe someone they knew would be gravely injured or, loath as they were to consider it, never come home at all.

Remie's face sunk into gloom, and Gees patted him on the shoulder. "Come on, it'll be okay," Gees said. "You should trust in the knights." This was a surprisingly emotional display from Gees, but it did make Remie feel better.

"You're right," Remie said. "I hope everyone will come home safe and we can be together again." Then he added mentally, *I hope the same goes for Heath and Queen as well...* However, Remie no longer firmly believed this could

happen.

Meanwhile, Slad bounded over to the food cart and called back to Remie and Gees, “Hey, how many do you want? I should order a bunch, right?”

Remie and Gees rushed over. “Stop!” Gees cried. “If you order too many, you’ll ruin your dinner.”

“Yes, moderate yourself, please,” Remie added.

The food cart owner chuckled at them. “You boys are knights, aren’t you?” he asked.

“No, we’re still squires,” said Gees.

“I see. But you’re still going to give that Duke Zerenade fellow what’s coming to him, aren’t you? I support that. Here, take this. On the house.”

“Wow!” Slad cried.

“Th-Thank you!” said Remie.

Such was Wienne at the time.

Afterwards, a group of knights came to the north dorm to see the boys (even though they were doing their work diligently, for once). This group often ran around with Crow and were a friendly bunch. Crow wasn’t with them this time, as rumor had it he was currently working alongside the king on some things. Crow and Heath were once in the same platoon, so it was possible Roy and Crow were using their work as an excuse to hide from her.

Surprised at this sudden visit, one of the boys asked, “What’s wrong? Is there an issue with the war preparations?”

“Nah, don’t worry about that,” said a knight. “Don’t you know the circus is in town?”

“Oh yes, but we’re not going, of course! There’s a war on, after all!”

They hadn’t planned on it in advance, but all the boys had come to the same conclusion to boycott the circus. Even though the north dorm was normally a gaggle of problem children, this time they picked up on the unspoken

expectation.

The knights smirked. “Nah, go have fun.”

“Huh?”

The boys were shocked. They thought for sure they would have been forbidden to attend.

“Sure, there’s a lot of work for you to do, but not so much that you can’t go see the circus,” said the knight.

“Well, yes,” said the spokesperson for the boys. “That does seem to be the case, but...”

Perhaps because the boys had been taking their work so seriously, there was now little left to do.

“But we’re going to the fighting soon,” he finished.

“And that’s exactly why we’re telling you to go,” said the knight. “Of course, we’ll do all we can to keep you safe, but you never know what’ll happen in battle. You need to have these fun experiences while you can. Sure, war is coming, but does that mean you have to avoid every bit of joy and live the rest of your life in boredom? No one knows what the future has in store for us, but I bet we’ll still win even if you guys goof off a little bit. We adults don’t mind; we’re telling you to go.”

The older knights had paid the squires a visit just to grant (or practically order) them permission. Plus, even with the war preparations, the boys still had a certain amount of free time. And so they gladly accepted the knights’ kind offer.

“Okay!” one of the squires cried.

Another said, “Sweet, let’s go!”

“Now don’t go getting too excited and wreck anything,” the knights warned, “or else our commanders will have our heads.”

“Okay!” the boys swore.

Four days before Roy’s army set off, Queen and his friends went to the circus

together and had a grand old time.

“Wow! That was incredible!” cried Remie. “Did you see the lion?”

“Yeah,” said Slad. “It was like a cat, but enormous!”

Slad and Remie could not hide their excitement. Queen, watching them, was glad he came along, but his happiness soon evaporated when he looked up at the moon and thought, *I wish Fie could have come with us too.*

Stop thinking about her, he reprimanded himself. *Didn't I promise to stop worrying the others?* He let out a small sigh.

Then Gormus said to him, “I dropped something. Will you come with me to get it?”

“Sure.”

Gormus called to the others, “Hey, Queen and I are going back to grab something I dropped.”

“Got it! We'll wait for you at the food stands!”

“Sounds good.”

Queen followed Gormus who, for some reason, skirted the entrance to the circus tent and led them to a deserted spot. With the performance complete and the resultant hubbub subsided, the only sounds Queen could hear were the crew members quietly clearing up after the show. Here, Gormus turned around and said, looking baffled, “You don't need to force yourself like this. You don't have to come out with the others if you don't want to, and it's okay to be depressed. Don't feel like you need to hide it.”

Gormus must have noticed what Queen was going through, which Queen felt grateful for, but it also bothered him that someone was still worried about him despite his best efforts. If Fie were there, she would have told him how to handle this awkward situation. But she was not. It was up to him to do a better job at being attentive to other people's feelings, Queen reflected.

“Okay...” he said.

The two stood there for a few moments in silence, watching the starry sky.

Finally, Gormus muttered, “Are the stories about you and Heath dating true...?”

When he examined his true feelings, he realized that, deep down, he had been purposefully avoiding this topic of conversation. Whoever dated whom was none of his business, so he had worked to avoid the gossip as much as possible, claiming that this was for Queen’s sake, but...perhaps it was also for his own.

Queen turned bright red and stammered out, “Y-Yeah.”

No way, Gormus thought. A storm of complex emotions assailed him, including ones that astonished even him. He knew Queen couldn’t tell a lie to save his life, which meant he knew all along that the rumors must have been true, but to hear it from Queen’s mouth was another story.

Gormus immediately stopped trying to probe into what these emotions meant. *I don’t need to know all the details*, he thought, *especially not now. There’s something more important anyway*. Right now, he needed to help a certain person both Heath and he considered a dear friend: Queen.

Queen was socially inept enough to not ask for help even when his close friend was right in front of him, with no one else around. Yet even if he could not, something still had to be done. Gormus had spent over a year with Heath and Queen, which meant that, lacking the resident idiot, the task of helping Queen fell to him.

“This is coming from a place of being Heath’s friend, okay?” he said. “Heath’s the biggest idiot I’ve ever met, a horrible show-off, and a greedy little bastard to boot. But he’s not the kind of person who would ever break up with his sweetheart for no reason. So calm down and wait for him, okay?”

Queen’s eyes widened momentarily before he returned to his usual blank look, this time with an extra smile.

“Yes, that’s true,” he said. A light flickered in his eyes for one brief moment before it went out again, only to be replaced by sorrow. “But I can think of plenty of good reasons to break up with me. I’m still just a kid, and we were having an affair, and I’m nowhere near as mature and appealing as His Majesty the King. Besides, I told her back when we started dating that I’d protect her,

but I can't protect her from anything."

Gormus couldn't exactly refute any of those points. "Well, uh..." he said. "Don't let it get to you, okay?"

Chapter 31 — Knocked Over with a Fie-ther

The news of Duke Zerenade's insurrection reached Fie as well—or, rather, King Roy told her directly. Roy did not look himself as of late, and had been awfully busy, she thought. She was very thankful that he took the time out of his busy day to come tell her the news in person, but she was concerned for his health. The Captain Yore of today looked far more unwell than the captain of yore.

As another one of Roy's meetings wrapped up, he stepped out of the council room to find Fie waiting outside.

"Heath!" he said. "No, excuse me. I mean Princess Fie."

"Good to see you, Captain!" she said.

He felt a stab of pain in his heart every time he saw her; however, that was no excuse to avoid her. He had a responsibility towards her as the one who had placed her in her unfortunate situation to begin with.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Is something bothering you?" Even as busy as he was in the war preparations, he'd see to it at once to resolve any problem Fie might have.

Fie giggled and pulled out an enormous tea pot. "I made you tea to help perk you up!" she said. This tea was made from boiling stimulant herbs.

The ministers watching this exchange all thought, *Oh no*. King Roy had already drunk five cups of the stuff only a few minutes ago, claiming he had no time to waste eating lunch (much to the ministers' horror) and that he'd make it through the afternoon by guzzling cup after cup (much to the ministers' *continued* horror). Roy's veins must have been running with mostly tea at this point.

Yet he took the cup anyway. "Thank you," he said. There was no getting out of this now. Roy had a responsibility to drink this as, he reminded himself, the one who had placed her in her unfortunate situation to begin with.

“You’re welcome!” Fie chirped. She poured him another cup with a beaming smile. (Roy’s poor stomach...)

“You shouldn’t push yourself so hard,” Fie chided him as he knocked back the tea.

“Yes, but I want to bring this war to an end before anyone comes to harm.”

(Roy’s poor stomach!)

Roy drank five cups in all before his stomach felt like it would explode. However, he didn’t betray a word of his discomfort to Fie, tightening his abdominal muscles and sloshing off to his next meeting.

With nothing else planned, Fie returned to her assigned room and ruminated on what to do next. Nowadays, she spent her time either exploring the palace or talking with Captain Yore, but Fie did not have any particular goals at the moment, which also gave her nothing particular to do.

Reflecting on it now, Fie remembered being told that she was taken on as a squire because her small build made her suited for espionage work. Yet now that the investigation into the duke was over, that left Fie with no more reason to pursue the knighthood. *I’ve been completely removed from my post*, she thought to herself, and internally sobbed. She was already well aware that she couldn’t return to the knights, but realizing her potential job was gone hit her with a fresh sting of disappointment.

Of course, she was thrilled that Fielle’s problems were almost over, but she couldn’t help feeling lonely when she knew that she’d soon be left alone again.

“What’s going to happen to my future?” she asked herself with a sigh.

“Pardon?” asked a nearby maid, startled by the question.

Fie looked at her curiously. “What’s up?” she asked.

“N-Nothing, Your Highness,” the maid mumbled. She was one of the maids assigned to Fie upon Fie’s return to the palace. At first, the prospect of working for such a person of such ill repute filled the maid with trepidation, but she soon discovered firsthand that Fie was quite a lovely person. In fact, she even regretted being complicit in spreading those rumors.

From the maid's perspective, Fie's future was set in stone. Everyone in the castle now knew Roy and Fielle's marriage was a sham, which made Fie the closest thing to the king's legitimate first wife. It would have been another story if Roy and Fie did not get along, but the two were, to an outsider's perspective, shockingly close, even more so than Fielle and Roy, the pair everyone thought were so in love. The biggest mystery was how a second wife shut away in the consort's chambers could then have become so close with the king.

However, from Fie's perspective, her future was a worrisome thing she had no control over. She sighed again. "There's nothing I can do about it..." she mumbled.

The maid was at a loss of what to do, seeing her mistress look so distressed.

Yet as the maid looked at her, Fie continued pondering the question: What *did* she want to do? Well, she wanted to support Fielle, and she wanted to assist Captain Yore. But now that Fie could no longer become a knight, she didn't think she'd be allowed to do either of those things. Those were both best left to the adults.

Just then, Fie suddenly realized why this bothered her so much—she was lonely. Sure, she talked to Sir Crow and Captain Yore, but only occasionally, and she couldn't see Queen, Gormus, Remie, Gees, Slad, the 18th platoon, or the rest of her squire friends. She wasn't alone per se, but she had suddenly lost everyone whom she had once been able to see at any time. From here on out, she likely wouldn't be able to see even Sir Crow and the captain on a frequent basis either. That, she thought, was what was making her lonely.

But how selfish of her to worry about that, she chided herself. Captain Yore was working his hardest to help Fielle out of a very sticky situation, so it was up to Fie to grin and bear it. "I shouldn't think that I'm lonely," she told herself.

The maid overheard this comment and rushed to the head maid in a tizzy. The king's wife was lonely! What if that led to issues in their marriage? However, the maid was also worried for Fie's emotional wellbeing. *If you had told me a year ago*, she thought to herself, *that I would someday be rushing off to care for the most infamous girl in the kingdom, I would never have believed you*. Yet after a month with her mistress, the maid was so fond of Fie she couldn't help

but worry for her.

The maid's feelings and other circumstances aside, Fie felt that her current position was too uncertain. She couldn't return to the squires, so what next? She had not the faintest idea. Then there was her relationship with Queen, which was likewise stuck in limbo. Oh, Queen... She wondered what he was up to now. Maybe he had forgotten all about her. Or, maybe, he still had feelings for her after all this time.

What did it mean to have feelings for someone anyway? She didn't know, and that meant she couldn't begin to imagine how Queen felt about this whole scenario. Was there anything she could do to help him? And what would that even be?

Fie added her concern for Queen to the list of things weighing on her mind.

Roy received the news of the duke's insurrection the minute it began, and, thanks to his uncle, it came as no surprise. Roy had already removed the duke's allies from power and reorganized the army in preparation. The corruption under the late king ran deep, leading to traitors working for the duke having infiltrated even the highest levels of command in the army before Roy could remove them. This was what led to Roy's decision to publicize the truth about his marriage with Fielle alongside the news of the insurrection.

Roy also wanted to eliminate the nasty rumors about Fie, but his ministers cautioned him against it for fear of harming the king's influence on his people just before a war. Ultimately, Fie herself stopped him, and in the end, Roy was unable to use any of his kingly influence to make even the slightest amends to her. If anything, up until he learned of her true identity, Roy cared not one whit about those rumors. And now, with Roy pretending to be perfectly honest in these public announcements, he knew those awful stories about her would never change.

This was the first time in Roy's life that he had ever worried about a girl. Even though he detested women, he believed being a wonderful king was all that was necessary to make even the most loathsome of women happy. And yet, looking at Fie and her unhappiness caused solely by his actions, he finally

realized how egotistical this line of thinking was.

The head maid conveyed the younger maid's report to King Roy. "It appears that Her Highness Princess Fie is lonely, Your Majesty," she said.

Roy stopped what he was working on the moment he heard Fie's name. "Is she really?" he asked.

The head maid had known Roy for many years but had never seen him react like this before. Ever detesting wasting time, he always worked through every one of her reports to him, and even though he listened courteously and gave all the correct responses, he never showed signs of feeling any emotion about what he heard.

He scratched his head, looking unusually worried. "I wonder what we should do about that," he said.

This was the first time the head maid had ever seen him show any concern for a woman, which, she thought, was a step in the right direction.

She suggested, "Would you be amenable to chaperoning Her Highness to the circus? According to our younger maidservants, it is ever so disappointing if one lacks the opportunity to see it."

"Really? Very well," said Roy with a sigh of relief. "Please make a reservation for one seat in the royal box."

It sounded like the king planned to send her off alone. The head maid hesitated, unsure of whether or not she should take the next step and advise him further. If the princess was lonely, then shouldn't she be wanting for company? Perhaps King Roy's lack of experience with women prevented him from understanding this sort of thing. Yet, as she fretfully watched King Roy attack his pile of work, she concluded that she would have to save this for another time. The weight of supporting a kingdom must have been ferociously heavy. What he needed in a woman was someone to help support him, but Roy and Fie could develop their relationship later. It was not too late for Fie to slowly close the metaphorical gap between them.

Fie was overjoyed when she received the invitation to go to the circus.

“Does that mean Captain Y—uh, I mean, His Majesty the King—is coming with me?!” she cried.

“No... I apologize, but I’m afraid I can’t,” the minister who gave her the invitation said.

Her face fell. Having to go by herself made her even lonelier, especially since she had planned to see the circus with Queen and her other friends.

Concerned for her, the minister asked, “Should I ask His Majesty on your behalf?”

She quickly shook her head. “No, he’s busy. I’m sorry for being so selfish. I’ll be okay; I can have fun on my own.” She smiled at him, but it was clearly forced.

The minister sighed. Contrary to all the bad rumors, she really was a sweet girl.

Crow and Roy were swamped with work. Even though Fie’s usual convoy of maids and guards would accompany her, they weren’t exactly her idea of fun companions. Sure, she had come to know them all better, but they still weren’t her friends. Her real friends, the squires, were separated from her due to the recent, sudden circumstances. Where was the fun in visiting the circus without them? Yet Fie could not tell either Roy or Crow the way she felt, because doing so, she thought, would be selfish.

The day of the circus finally arrived, and Fie left the palace for the first time in weeks, flanked by her guards and maids. However, no matter how much Fie tried to strike up a conversation with them, the maids kept their distance from her, which only made her feel lonelier. Still, she resolved to enjoy the show, especially after all the trouble her captain had gone to in order to secure her a seat.

Fie and her companions were admitted on the opposite side of the tent from the entrance where a crowd of commoners thronged to enter. As she walked in, the ringmaster and the performers bowed deeply before the queen consort. Fie was led to a fine box meant for the royal couple; it afforded the best view in the house.

The circus tent was deserted, with the space at the center of the tent where the performance would take place surrounded by rows of empty seats. The maids soon excused themselves as well, leaving Fie completely alone.

The other attendees began to stream in through the entrance. *Oh...* Fie thought. The squires had come to see the show! Slad, Gees, Remie, Gormus, Queen... All the friends she had spent so much time with settled in their seats in front of her, faces lit up in excitement for the upcoming show. But she was not among them. If she still was one of their number, would she have been there, watching the show beside them? The moment she thought that, her positive attitude vanished, and a chill wind blew through her heart.

A maid appeared at her elbow carrying a cup. "Your tea, Your Highness," the maid said.

"Ah..."

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?"

Fie dearly wanted to ask, "Won't you watch the show with me?" However, she knew from their time together that these maids had received an elite education in serving, and if Fie presented her with this choice, it would only bewilder the poor girl. Fie couldn't possibly bother her more than she already was.

"No, but thank you for asking," she said, and forced herself to smile. Relieved, the maid left her again, and Fie was once more alone.

If only she could have turned back the clock and prevented her secret from ever slipping out. Then she'd be down there with her friends, watching the show, and, if their schedules aligned, maybe the knights from the 18th platoon would be there too.

Fie longed to leap the railing surrounding the royal box, run to her friends, and enjoy the show with them. But she couldn't. It hadn't been long since she had met her maids and guards, but she already understood that running away would cause them no end of trouble. Gone were the days in which she could slip out from the castle and hang out with her friends whenever she wanted.

The ringmaster signaled for the show to begin, and clowns took the stage,

juggling balls and cracking jokes at the crowd. A breathtaking duo, a man and a woman, soared on the flying trapeze near the ceiling of the tent. A lovely young woman performed a show in perfect sync with a troupe of trained hounds. A dexterous man threw knives at another performer, making the whole audience gasp.

Smiles lit up the faces of every person watching the show, and yet the only light in Fie's eyes was the reflection of the stage lights. She sighed as another spectacular act finished. Suddenly, a voice behind her said, "What's wrong? I thought this was your first time seeing the circus, Your Highness. What's making you frown?"

Fie's eyes opened wide, and she spun around. "Sir Crow?" She gasped.

He was supposed to be busy, and yet, here he was. His blond hair shone in the lights, making him look every inch the handsome knight. There he was—a wannabe Casanova, yes, but also Fie's strong, captivating, and respectable mentor, the one who was always there for her whenever she was upset.

"I heard you were going to the circus alone," he explained. "I was worried you'd want company, so being the awesome mentor that I am, I decided to show up. Here, I bought you grilled chicken with herbs that I bought at a stall outside. It's your favorite, right?"

Crow passed her a heavenly smelling skewer wrapped in paper. The scent made Fie realize how hungry she was.

"To tell you the truth, I wanted to bring Yore along too, since I figured he's the one you really wanted to see. But he's too busy right now, and I'm not, so I came instead," Crow said with a sheepish chuckle.

You liar, Crow, Fie thought.



The nation was in the middle of preparing for war and Crow, as one trusted by the knighthood, must have been as swamped as King Roy, as evidenced by his hair, normally perfect but now with a few strands out of place.

But, lonely and isolated as she was, his presence was enough to make Fie happy instantly. He was always like this—whenever she felt alone, he was always there for her. His warm smile could always melt her frozen heart, just as it did on the day she ran away from the consort's chambers to become a squire.

He did tease her from time to time, but he also helped her out more than anyone back when she had no one else to turn to, looked out for her and was there for her when she began working as a knight, and helped cheer her up whenever she felt down. Whenever Crow actually acted seriously, he was an amazing person. It always warmed her heart to think of him. His presence truly saved her. She knew that with him around, no matter how dire the circumstances, she could keep going.

Just then, she realized: *This must be how Queen feels about me.* Was this the way he thought of her? Did he behold her with the same warmth? Was this how he felt when they were together? This was the first time she had ever understood him, and she felt elated to think he could feel that way about her.

Crow looked at her quizzically. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, it's nothing."

"You sure?"

There he was, being considerate and watching out for her again. She looked up at him and said, "Honestly, I'm in more of a fish and chips mood today."

"Don't give me that sass after I went out of my way to buy you this!" he grumbled playfully, pinching her cheek.

Amused, Fie whined, "No, stop! You asked, Sir Crow, so I had to tell you the truth." Even if her answer itself was a lie, her desire to enjoy the moment with Crow was honest, and perhaps that made the entire statement honest enough.

"Hey, Sir Crow," she said. "That's a lion, right?"

"Yeah. Looks real impressive, doesn't it? It's jumping through a flaming hoop."

“Duh, I know. Hey, which one of us did it better?”

“What kind of question is that?”

Fie made up her mind. Now she understood Queen’s feelings, and what to do next. But for the moment, she resolved to enjoy the circus and Crow’s company.

When the show was over, the maids saw the bright smile on Fie’s face and sighed in relief. They had been worried that she would have been lonely watching the show on her own, and had wondered if it might not have been better had they stayed to keep her company.

“It looks like you had a wonderful time, Your Highness,” said a maid.

“I sure did,” Fie said. “Thanks, guys.”

What a lovely person she is, the maids thought, charmed by her gratitude. Really, how did such nasty rumors get told about her in the first place? They looked back on their objections, such as wondering whether they were being punished for some error, from when they had first been assigned to wait on Princess Fie, and felt chagrined.

“We’d best be going back to the castle, Your Highness,” said another maid.

“Sounds good to me,” Fie said, and the whole party set off.

Later that night, Fie made up her mind again. *I need to choose how I want to live the rest of my life*, she thought. First things first, she had to verify exactly how Queen felt about her. She couldn’t afford to be complacent about this.

“Your Highness, might I ask what you’re doing?” said one of the maids.

“Just getting a bit of stretching in,” she said.

First things first (for real this time), she needed to get back in shape.

“Hey, if anyone has a hand free, come move these packages,” called a man.

“Okay!” a squire responded. “Come on, Queen, you can help too!”

“Okay,” said Queen.

After the circus performance was over, Queen and his friends went back to work, loading wagons bound for the battlefield with foodstuffs and other supplies. However, this task was soon to be complete, and it was only a few days before the wagons were scheduled to leave the capital. Queen and the other boys weren't going to the front lines, but they would continue to help in the supply corps.

"At this rate, I'm better trained to be a porter than a knight," one of the boys grumbled as he piled more luggage into the wagon.

"What can you expect?" his friend said. "We're only squires."

Even in a crisis like the duke's insurrection, the squires were as laid-back as ever. Some figured that acting carefree now, while they were not actively facing war, made the whole thing less nerve-racking. Each squire had their own personal take on the situation, but the group as a whole was adapting to this new way of life without Fie. She had always been, in some sense, the center of attention, always causing some kind of trouble, which even Queen reluctantly had to admit. He had tried to track her down whenever he had the time, but before he knew it, he soon stopped looking altogether. *At this rate, I'll probably get used to her being gone*, he thought. What a horrible idea.

"Looks like we're done for the day!" a squire called.

"Man, I'm pooped! Thank goodness it's time for dinner," his friend said.

"I'm covered in sweat," complained a third squire, "so I'm going to hit up the baths first."

The other boys agreed with him, and the group all trooped off to the bathhouse, so blithely you would never know war was just over the horizon.

Queen likewise bathed, ate dinner, and returned to his room, taking the route he always used to walk with Fie. Today's work was rather heavy labor, and the dorm was quiet. Everyone must have been asleep.

Naturally, Queen's thoughts turned to Fie. They had spent so much time together in this room—playing cards, when his skill was no match for Fie's; sitting on the bed reading books together, when Fie would fall asleep halfway through and set his heart pounding; attempting to do boyfriend and girlfriend

things like *k-kissing*, when he tried his best even if Fie ended up taking the lead every time.

Everyone in the north dorm was kind and fun to be around, but he had only really gotten to know them because of Fie. Back in the east dorm, everyone kept their distance from him. It was only because Fie had drawn him in that he had made this group of friends, and it was being with Fie, more than anything else, which made him happy. She was so bright, so good-natured (even though her strange dark side shone through from time to time), and so fundamentally kind. Her adorable smile and impish expressions always made Queen's heart skip a beat. She was, to Queen, the cutest girl in all the world.

I wonder if I could be happy just standing in the same room as her again. Maybe if he gave up this hope, if he even *could* give up this hope, he could stand a chance of being with her again—not as her boyfriend, but as her knight. In such a situation, she would become another man's wife... Well, okay, she already had. Queen could still be the knight of King Roy's wife though, and stay with her in that sense.

I bet I'll be jealous, he thought. Horribly, horribly jealous. King Roy was respectable, attractive, and a great match for Fie, but Queen was certain he'd be consumed with jealousy if he saw the two of them acting as a married couple. Watching would be an envious agony, but he knew he would not be able to look away. Yet, compared with the other option of never seeing Fie again, that heartache might as well be sheer bliss.

Maybe Fie had known this would happen, and that was why she had turned him down the first time he had told her about his feelings. No, she had turned him down for his sake, out of kindness. She must have thought about it objectively and saw this as the inevitable outcome. A queen and a squire could never love one another and have their happily ever after; the potential dangers and number of obstacles were much too high. Yet after he continued to pursue her, she finally accepted him, probably out of compassion and pity more than anything. She had treated him like a child. Come to think of it, when they began dating, Fie's smiles often suggested that something was preying on her mind. What a little boy Queen was—refusing to listen to reason and selfishly begging to be her boyfriend, even though her future held no room for him! And yet Fie

gifted him this precious time of their relationship anyway. Fie was far more mature than he would ever be. He had sworn to protect her, but he was incapable of doing any such thing.

Queen had considered carrying her away and marrying her if push came to shove, but he had only thought of such a daring thing when none of these obstacles blocked his path. Now that he was back in reality and push had long since passed shove, he knew that the disappointed looks on the older knights' faces would stop him before he could even reach Fie at the palace. It would also worry his friends to no end and cause a great deal of trouble for the kind man who had gone to the trouble of raising him after his parents passed away. It was over. Completely over. No matter how much he loved her, there were too many things that just couldn't be done. Fie must have understood all of this as well, so he could not expect her to come to him either.

"I'm still just a kid..." He sighed. He wanted to become a brave knight to protect her, yet Fie was ultimately the one who protected Queen with her kindness. He couldn't protect the girl he loved, nor take her by the hand and run away with her.

Maybe he didn't deserve to see her any more. "Maybe my love was doomed from the start..." he said. Tears leaked from his eyes.

Just then, a light tapping rang out from Queen's window pane. He wondered who in the world could be knocking at his window in the dead of night when a voice said, "Open up! Let me in."

He jolted. That was Fie's voice. This was the girl who had just been on his mind—no, more than that, the girl who occupied his thoughts endlessly.

For a moment, Queen was too stupefied to move. Then, with a gasp, he lurched for his window and frantically threw it open.

Fie did not come inside but instead looked up at Queen through the window. She broke out into a smile when she saw his face. "It's been too long," she said.

"Uh...uh-huh," he stammered.

She noticed the area around his eyes and asked, "Were you crying?"

"Uh, no, I'm fine..." he bluffed, trying to act tough. He quickly rubbed his eyes.

“Really now?” she said. She reached out to stop him and used her handkerchief to gently dab away the rest of his tears.

Queen had a million questions to ask her. What had happened to her? What was going on with her and the king? How did she feel about Queen now? Yet none of the questions would come out. The sole thing monopolizing his thoughts right now was how beautiful Fie looked standing in that dress under the moonlight.

After studying Queen with a long look, Fie smiled. “Queen,” she said. “Will you marry me?”



For a moment, Queen did not know what to say. He turned the word “marry” over in his mind, but the only thing that came out of his mouth was “Uh...wha...?”

Fie tilted her head in confusion. “Is that a no?” she asked.

Queen didn’t even need to think before shaking his head. How could he *not* want to marry Fie?

Seeing his response, Fie grinned. “So that’s a yes, right? Gotcha.”

Then, with a nod, she turned and leaped off his second-story balcony. She waved to Queen from the ground and called, “See you later, Queen!”

“Huh? Uh—yeah, uh, bye!”

Still not caught up to speed, Queen watched stupefied as Fie waved again and then ran off. He stared at the place where she had been, half-believing this was some kind of dream.

I’m going to marry her... Queen felt such shock that he could have been knocked over with a feather.

Fie crept back through the palace garden. She had slipped out without telling anyone earlier, so it was vital that she get back before she worried her maids. Thinking about it, this garden reminded her an awful lot of the garden she walked through on that fateful day when she escaped the consort’s chambers for the first time. That was the day she had spotted a paper, blown to her in the wind, advertising the squire admission test, and decided to become a squire.

Now her dreams of being a squire were shattered, but she knew so much more than she did before. She could see now that her life seemed so hopeless only because of her sense of pride; had she reached out to those around her, perhaps everything would have turned out differently. Now she knew Sir Crow, Captain Yore, and all the other knights in the 18th platoon. Now her friend circle consisted of Gormus, Remie, Slad, and Gees, with Queen rounding out the bunch. If someone turned back the clock and presented her with the same choice, she knew she’d choose in a heartbeat to be a squire once again,

because she couldn't imagine a life in which she hadn't met all of her friends.

Those had been such bright, fun days, but now those days were over, and the time had come for Fie to choose the course of the rest of her life. Even though she already knew she could never be a squire again, the initial news had still sent her into a depression. Now that she had recovered, it was time to consider the possible options for her future.

If she let things run their course, she would still be Roy's consort, and, if luck was not on her side, she would become his first wife and rightful queen. Most everyone around her was hinting at this possible outcome, save for the chancellor who had told her point-blank that this was his desire. As much as that would hurt Queen, she wasn't entirely opposed to the idea. Growing up, she had thought she'd never have a chance to marry or fall in love with anyone, doomed to spend the rest of her life wedded to a complete stranger against her will. (Well, she wasn't wrong about that last part...)

King Roy was an honorable man. She had hated his guts at the start, but as time went on and she had such fun living in Orstoll, she continued to hate the man himself, but not his work as the king. After all, she had spent the best time of her life here in Orstoll, the country that he governed. Then there was Captain Yore, he who always did his best in helping others, caring for Fie with compassion, and, occasionally, harshly rebuking her. She worked as hard as she could and became a useful ally to him with only a *little* misbehavior (from her perspective—besides, she always apologized to make up for it). Now that Fie knew that King Roy and Captain Yore were the same person, the prospect of spending the rest of her life with him didn't sound all that bad.

However, that left the issue of Queen. He was the first person in her entire life who had ever claimed to have feelings for her, and he was one of her best friends. Now that Fie understood his feelings, she knew that choosing to go with Roy would hurt her self-critical friend.

If she was going to end her marriage with Roy to be with Queen, she had to do it now. Once Fielle was safe, the country would want to head off in a new direction, dragging Fie along with it. If that were to happen, she couldn't imagine others would be very supportive of her having a boyfriend. If things went bad enough, Queen might even end up in trouble. However, simply having

a boyfriend was not sufficient reason to end a marriage. At the very least, she needed to make plans to marry Queen, hence why it was so important to understand what Queen wanted too. Did he love her enough to marry her, or did he simply want to date more casually? It'd be a complete mess if she somehow had the wrong idea. Queen was still young; maybe he wanted more time to sow his wild oats à la Sir Crow before settling down. Therefore, she had decided to ask Queen if he wanted to marry her. What a relief that he said yes —she hadn't had the wrong idea after all.

Now, having confirmed Queen's intentions, Fie needed to do her part in convincing the king and everyone else involved to let her marry Queen. But, Fie thought, this was her captain, after all. Surely he would be understanding.

Wrapped up in her own thoughts, she realized that she had spent far too much time on this midnight stroll. She needed to get back to the palace, and fast, or else risk the chancellor's wrath.

Before she left, Fie looked back over her shoulder up into the boughs of a tree. Roy had told her plenty once her true identity was revealed, but she already knew, even before coming to the palace, that there had been one more man watching over her the entire time. That meant he was probably still here too, just like when she was a squire, keeping an eye on her and worrying all the while. Maybe he had even lent her a helping hand from time to time. She knew that if she annulled her marriage with the king and married Queen instead, he would no longer be there for her. Therefore, she waved her last goodbye to the man who had taught her so many things, the man who had helped her from the shadows, the man who had given her the gift of his kindness.

"Thank you for always watching out for me, Sir Cain," she called.

There was no response, save for a rustle of branches. Fie giggled and turned to walk away again.

Chapter 32 — A Cloud with a Silver Lining

Roy's army finally mobilized one month after the king received the news of the duke's insurrection. The knights and soldiers marched down the main street of Wienne in long columns, as a crowd of civilians thronged the sides of the road to proudly see them off. The squires followed at the rear of the columns, accompanying the supply train. Unlike the knights who stared straight ahead, their faces stern, the boys goggled at the procession and trailed along nervously.

"L-Look at how big the army is," one boy breathed. "We're only one small part of it."

"And this isn't the full army," his friend told him. "There are more troops camped outside Wienne on the plains, and as we head for the duchy, we'll join up with even more reinforcements—soldiers camped in forts along the way, noblemen's troops, and such. This army's only getting bigger from here."

"Wow!"

This was a whole new world to the squires, whose only military experience thus far came from patrolling the city.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the column, Queen recounted the story of the other night to Gormus.

"What?" Gormus said. "You're telling me that Heath came to your window?"

"Yeah." In some ways, it still felt like a dream; if anything, it felt more dreamlike as time went on. However, he really had met her that night. Probably. Yeah, definitely.

"Huh..." said Gormus. "What'd you guys talk about?"

Queen shivered and tripped over absolutely nothing in the roadway.

"You good?" Gormus asked.

"Y-Yeah, I'm okay." Queen's cheeks turned a brilliant red. Since Gormus

asked, he'd have to confess that she asked him to marry her, but it was so shocking he didn't know if Gormus would believe it. Heck, *he* barely believed it.

Gormus gave Queen a sidelong glance and said, "You don't have to tell me if it's too hard to say. At any rate, I'm guessing whatever it was isn't anything I need to worry about."

Well, that was certainly true. Fie looked healthy, and she hadn't said anything bad to Queen. Honestly, forget bad—what she said was amazing. Yet maybe the sheer suddenness of the request *was* cause for concern.

Marrying Fie... he mused. He couldn't realistically picture that at all. However, in his wildest dreams, Fie looked absolutely heavenly in a white wedding dress.

Roy's army left Wienne, united with the main forces camped out on the plains, and turned north. Orstoll was a large country, but, situated as it was in the temperate center of the continent, the climate changed little as they moved northward. The vegetation likewise remained the same, with plenty of the broad-leafed trees and grasses familiar to these warm lands.

Roy's army came to a halt near a peaceful forest just outside of the duke's duchy. The long march had gone off without a hitch.

"It feels like we're exchanging love letters..." Crow sighed, propping himself up on one elbow as he sat at a table in the commander's tent. Originally planning to participate in the fighting as the leader of a squadron, Crow was now assigned to be the commanding officer of his family's troops, which led to him being here.

"I want to avoid pointless combat if it's in any way possible," Roy said. His army far outnumbered the duke's, and in light of the proof Roy obtained pertaining to the duke's crimes, the duke had almost negligible public support. His sole allies were likewise corrupt lords or those whose circumstances had forced their hands into pledging temporary support.

One example of this latter group was the noble families that governed this stretch of land, known as Arkhorn. Their situation was simple—they were situated too close to the duchy for comfort. Regardless of their desire or lack thereof to be affiliated with the duke, resisting him while existing just under his

nose would have invited attack and subsequent destruction. Thus, they swore their fealty to the duke and barricaded themselves in their own fortresses. However, even though they wanted to avoid their imminent demise courtesy of the duke, they had no desire to be crushed in rebellion against the royal army either, which they proved by allowing Roy's forces safe passage over their land. Many nobles in the area surrounding the duchy behaved similarly, and as such Roy's side came to a mass consensus to shift their goal from outright victory to merely mitigating damages.

Considering their strength, it would have taken less than two days to storm these fortresses before they fell, yet to do so would be to sacrifice the lives of the besieging soldiers and turn the opinion of the other nobility still sequestered away in their own forts. Instead, Roy opted to work out agreements with the lords of Arkhorn. To do so required displaying the strength of his force to the sequestered lords by marching his army outside their forts before sending letters with terms for surrender. Of course, such a slowdown could have been in the duke's favor, and Roy did not trust him to not launch a desperate surprise attack. Therefore, Roy did not neglect to guard the supply lines and post sentries in the surrounding area.

It had already been three days since the talks had begun, and, like Crow said, the war effort now more resembled writing love letters to the nobles than actual fighting. They discussed the terms for surrender, the process of liberating the forts, and the promises to be upheld by both parties in this arrangement. As these nobles were, at least nominally, allied with the duke, Roy could not let them off scot-free, but he was likewise averse to punishing them too heavily. Moderation, he thought, was vital. However, nothing was more vital than earning their trust. Roy needed them to trust that their mutual promises would be observed and that he would punish them no more than they deserved. In that sense, it really was like an exchange of letters between two lovers.

"Why do we have to treat with a bunch of dreary old men?" Crow said with a disgusted shake of the head. "Speak for yourself, but I'd rather talk terms with a pretty gal."

Despite his whining, Crow could not protest this plan of action. He was an affable man, with plenty of friends in both the knighthood and the army, and

while he did not fear losing his life in battle, he was loath to see any of his friends die without just cause. Thus, Roy and Crow had no choice but to continue their paper negotiations.

There was now a meowing cat sitting in Fie's lap. A merchant in the palace had, for some unknown reason, foisted the cat off on Fie, and Fie, unable to abandon it, took it in as her pet.

"That merchant Kirk is infamous for being too pushy," a servant told her. "I suppose he must have come by so you would learn his name, Your Highness."

"Huh," said Fie. "Again? I wonder why." She didn't understand why all these merchants were dropping in, but it was a shame they were going to all this effort.

She had only just gone to check with Queen whether or not he wanted to marry her, and the answer was a resounding yes. Now that she knew what he wanted, it was her job to make it happen. On that note, Fie did not intend to remain in the palace much longer. Yes, everyone had been lovely to her, and she was quite grateful to them, but she didn't want to impose on their kindness forever.

Imagine me being married. She couldn't picture what marrying Queen would be like. She'd never been married before, she thought, so she had no idea what to expect. (Although, after thinking about it a moment longer, she realized she had been married all along—to Roy, that is.)

Essentially, to grant Queen's wish, she needed to marry, divorce, and then marry again. It was a lot of hustle and bustle, particularly considering that her awareness of having completed step one was tenuous at best.

The cat was now attached to Fie at the hip, probably because she took care of it herself rather than leave it up to her maids. Thank goodness she hadn't had a dog foisted upon her—in her state of relative confinement, she wouldn't have been able to take the poor thing out for walks as often as it needed. Also, with her rather dog-like boyfriend, she thought this arrangement might make one of them jealous (although, which would be the jealous one she could not say).

The cat was just a little thing, and it was impossible to believe that it was a distant cousin of the lion she had seen at the circus. Its brown and gray fur reminded her of Queen.

“I wonder how he’s doing?” she said.

The cat meowed at her in response.

He seemed to have been enjoying himself when she last saw him at the circus, but now he was marching off to war. She was rather worried for him and her other friends—Gormus, Slad, Remie, Gees, and the rest of the bunch. The knights in the 18th platoon, including Crow and Captain Yore, were likewise in danger, fighting directly on the front lines. True, they were all quite strong and as such gave her little cause to worry, but she still hoped they would all make it home safe.

Compared to the stressful war situation, life inside the palace was peaceful. Thanks to Roy flushing out the last traitors in the palace, even Fielle could now relax and enjoy the occasional tea party with her sister. These pleasant days renewed Fie’s gratitude towards King Roy and furnished her feelings with an additional helping of guilt.

Fie picked up her cat and looked up into the blue sky. It was such a beautiful day that it was hard to believe their kingdom was embroiled in war. *I wish I could be with the others and fight alongside them*, she thought. She still had just the slightest bit of rueful attachment to her former life as a squire.

Fie was unaware of it, but in King Roy’s absence, the role of stewarding the castle fell to her. She received all the visitors who came calling, and all the castle’s merchants descended on her in a flock. Yet, while she was unaware, the maidservants knew exactly what was going on. She was quickly taking on the role of a queen. The reason why the castle’s inhabitants were so calm in the king’s absence was because Fie was there to take care of them.

Queen and the other squires were engaged in all their usual tasks, distributing food supplies to the appropriate parties and loading wagons with weapons needed on the front lines. It was not glamorous work fit for a story of legend, but everyone understood that it needed to be done all the same. The squires

worked diligently in their camp on the plains, far from the front lines.

The news of the war situation reached their ears—the king’s victory was all but assured, probably due to his overwhelming strength. Duke Zerenade attempted to mass all of his followers together for battle, but only those already indicted for crimes answered his summons. Even though Roy was almost certain that Duke Zerenade was involved in this level of crime, he was reluctant to seize the rights granted to the duke by the former king without sufficient proof of the duke’s wrongdoing, for fear that it would destroy the level of trust he currently enjoyed with the nobility. Had that happened, more nobility would have sided with the duke, and the possibility of a larger conflict increased (although the king would still have won, assuredly). If such a war broke out, his allies and even the unaffiliated civilians would be subjected to a rise in organized crime and potential invasion from other countries seeking to capitalize on the discord in Orstoll. Therefore, the proof of Duke Zerenade’s wrongdoings assured the king’s victory, and allowed him to arrest the duke’s allies in the upper ranks of the military before any fighting began.

As a result, the duke’s sole allies were his literal partners in crime. His fate was such that his sole remaining option was to weather out the war before meekly begging the king for forgiveness. All the king’s side needed to fight were the duke’s private army and the criminals who were hiding in the duchy to avoid punishment. Among this last group was a group of former Orstollian knights who had committed many injustices under the old king’s rule, and an assassin squad of famous warriors of a far eastern land known as Aja.

King Roy’s troops had such an overwhelming advantage over the duke’s that the war could be ended with one decisive charge, but Roy wished to limit the number of casualties. Therefore, he worked to build a stranglehold around the duke, further cementing his chances of victory.

As a result, the squires were far removed from any horrors of war.

“Man, would it kill our commanders to let their guard down for a minute?” Slad complained as he stood on a pile of boxes to look out far over the campground. “Then maybe an enemy could slip through and attack the camp, and we’d finally get some action!”

“That’s a wicked thing to say,” Remie scolded him.

“That’s right,” said Gees. “There are some things you shouldn’t joke about.”

Slad whined. “Sorry,” he said, dejected at having been told off yet again.

Just then, much to Slad’s surprise, two people came to his aid—Rigel and Luka. The east dorm boys were doing the same sort of work not far from the north dorm squires’ station.

Rigel snorted derisively and said, “The boy speaks sense. Every day we are forced to transport packages and play lookout for the camp. Do you call that work befitting a knight?”

“Indeed,” said Luka. “And though we may be but squires, it is a great loss to Orstoll to not make the best of my genius ability.”

Their whining made Slad seriously reconsider his point. “Sorry,” he said. “I was wrong. No matter if it’s all quiet back here, our knights and soldiers are fighting in real danger.”

Remie smiled at him kindly. “Glad you understand now.”

Rigel snarled. “Nonsense! We won’t stand to be treated like this!”

“Yes,” cried Luka, “you’re all horribly beastly!”

However, no one appeared to back them up. In fact, when Persil showed up, he ignored the two of them and said to Queen’s group, “Sorry that my dorm mates are bothering you.” Rigel and Luka stared at Persil in shock (even *he* didn’t have their backs?) as Remie waved away his apology.

“It’s fine,” he said. “We’re used to it.” That was true, as after the East—North Interdormitory Duel, Rigel and Luka had been known to stop by the north dorm and play out similar arguments. One popular theory was that no one apart from the north dorm boys paid them any attention anymore.

As time went on, the king’s side continued to approach its...well, “actual” victory, so to speak. By the third week after the squires arrived, the amount of baggage to be transported dropped off altogether, and a week later, the war was over, in the king’s favor.

The squires began to take down and pack up the camp. While the boys were relieved that they had won, they couldn't help but feel the slightest bit of disappointment.

"We never really saw any action, huh?" said one of the boys. The boys hadn't goofed off for the entire war, and now that it was over, their sense of relief was overshadowed by their true concerns coming out in dribs and drabs. It was a universal fact of teenage boys—they loved situations with unimaginably high stakes.

"Yeah, I guess," another squire said as he cleaned up. "But that's life for you."

"It's better this way, right?" said a third.

Queen finished packing up his own things and turned to cleaning up the camp. He picked up an armful of heavy lumber and carried it away, thinking of Fie all the while. He still didn't understand what she meant when she had said, "Will you marry me?" Well, no. He understood what the words themselves meant, but Fie was already married. Her going on to marry Queen was a whole other story, and Queen couldn't imagine it at all.

I hope I can see her once we go home, Queen thought. Fie was presently still in the palace, and as such, he knew he wouldn't be able to so much as lay eyes on her. It had been a month since she had shown up at his window.

The kingdom's big problem was over, but Queen's big problem, upon proper consideration, was as much of an issue as ever. Even once he came home, he still saw no opportunity to meet with her, let alone to be with her as her boyfriend. He wondered to himself, *What's going to happen now?* Now that the crisis was over, the future was beginning to take on a more realistic tint in Queen's mind, but his hopes for that future were still but vague, hazy desires.

Meanwhile, Queen completely forgot that he was carrying a large, heavy armload of wood.

"H-Hey, Queen, watch it!" a squire cried.

"Huh?" said Queen.

Suddenly, he felt something slide out of his arms and land on his foot with a dull, heavy thud. He yelped like a puppy.

“Queen!” cried one of the squires. “Are you okay?”

A few hours later, one of the military doctors, now with little to do in the wake of the finished battles, sat down in front of Queen and his freshly bandaged foot.

“You’ll be all better in one month,” he informed Queen. “You should rest in one of the nearby towns until then.”

So much for going home soon.

The war ended with few casualties, with many of the duke’s men choosing to surrender and beg for their lives rather than die in the heat of battle. (Truly, what a bunch of small-time villains.)

“And with this, we’ve wrapped up a pretty big piece of business, huh?” said Crow.

“Yes, we have,” Roy agreed.

Now, with only the final tasks of taking in the captured criminals and returning to Wienne remaining, another part of the old king’s legacy was resolved. What a relief!

However, it was now time to face Roy’s own particular issue—namely, the one of his wife.

“What is to be done with Princess Fie?” he mused. The war had largely taken his mind off of her, as concerned as he was with saving the lives of his men, but he had still thought of Heath—or Fie, properly speaking—several times.

Crow frowned. It was rather odd to consider his cute, young squire friend Roy’s wife (never mind that she had been for some time already). “You guys are a couple,” he pointed out. “So where’s the harm in taking your time to figure things out?”

“We’re...a couple, you say?”

“I mean, yeah, you married her.” As odd as the word sounded on Roy’s tongue, they *had* tied the knot legally.

“Hmm...” Roy questioned the possibility of them being a couple, not out of a desire to dodge responsibility, but more from a sense of whether that was appropriate, given that she was forced into the marriage. He was fully aware that forcing her was a horrid act on his part; furthermore, he had been aware even before he forced her into it, relegating her to a passive position from which she had no say in the matter. How he hated himself for this!

Seeing Roy sink into another one of his depressive spells, Crow spoke up. “Quit whining about the past and worrying about what to do next. Why don’t you give some thought into what she means to you?”

“What she means to me?” Roy repeated. He pondered the question. What *did* Princess Fie mean to him? If this was last year, his immediate response would have been that she was his dear young squire. However, their relationship was more complicated now. Objectively speaking, they were husband and wife; contrarily, she was a victim and he an abuser. Complicated didn’t even begin to describe this relationship.

“You still have time before we return to Wienne and see her again,” Crow said. “Let down your burdens for a bit—Fie, the country, the whole works—and just give it some thought. Zephas and I can handle your work for you in the meantime.” Crow smiled at his worried friend and stepped out of the tent.

Roy pondered late into the night, alone in his tent save for a lone candle flame bobbing in front of him. What did Fie mean to him? Roy first met Fie at the squire admission test where, while searching for someone with the skills to join the 18th platoon immediately, Roy took notice of Fie’s match with Gormus. Apart from Crow, Roy had recruited every member of the platoon himself, and as such, he wanted to select a candidate in similar fashion from the pool of adult applicants. Outstanding talent was no simple thing to find, so he felt the need to examine each potential squire with due diligence.

However, he found himself drawn in by this young boy’s match. There was something beautiful about how this unrefined boy fought grimly with everything he had. The boy was small, perhaps not even twelve years old, and he faced one of the largest boys in the application pool. The large boy

possessed a talent to match his strong build, and the smaller boy looked on the verge of collapsing at any second. He stood no chance of winning, Roy thought, but it puzzled him that this boy tried so hard to win in spite of the size difference. Considering how young he looked, the boy would have had other opportunities to try for squirehood again later; however, he fought as if his life depended on it. Waterfalls of sweat had poured off of him, and his breathing became labored. His larger opponent sent him flying as if he never even stood a chance. It was all over. Roy had half-expected the boy to give up on his own. Coincidentally, the blow had sent the boy sprawling just before Roy, and Roy remembered seeing a momentary flicker of surrender in his eyes.

That was when Roy had called out to him. *Looking back on it now, I wonder why I did that*, Roy thought. There was nothing that required him to help the boy. Roy could just as easily have dismissed him in his thoughts; besides, one did not need to win their match to join the squires. Had the boy been deemed fit to join, it made no difference if he won or lost there. Perhaps, if Roy wanted to justify himself, he could have claimed it was for some more legitimate reason such as wanting to see the boy's level of dedication, in order to determine whether or not to accept him. Yet, as he thought about it now, he realized that he—forgetting his position both as an examiner and as a king—had simply wanted to help.

As Roy called out to the boy, a flame rekindled in his eyes. Roy knew this was not due to his own influence; the boy was cornered, and Roy felt he would have risen to his feet even without any support. Then, to Roy's genuine shock, the boy dove at his opponent's feet and yanked off one of his shoes. In the ensuing chaos, the boy took the opportunity to launch another attack.

No one could have expected what happened next. The small boy convulsed, struck with a cramp, as his stamina ran out. It was not a shocking sight, as the boy did not appear physically strong; however, the crowd of spectators expected him to fight to the bitter end, win or lose, and watched with bated breath. Exceeding their expectations, the small boy soldiered on through the cramp, his desperation leaving his opponent stupefied.

The match finally ended with the referee mercifully declaring the boy's

defeat. Everyone thought that even if he wasn't picked now, he was sure to be accepted as a squire in the future. Perhaps he simply wasn't cut out to be a knight yet, what with how small he was.

Roy looked down at that small boy and decided to accept the boy into the knighthood himself, realizing to his own surprise that he had already made up his mind to take the boy in sometime during the match. He needed a small, stealthy knight to be a spy for the Princess Fielle incident, but he hadn't planned on choosing a teenage boy for the role. That was what the Grass were for, but truthfully speaking, Roy wanted to disband them. They were all too willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the country. He had tried to broach the subject with them several times, but the Grass didn't understand a word of it. Oh well, Roy thought, it was to be expected when the Grass's training methods and servitude to the kingdom had been passed down for hundreds of years. He understood how important their espionage was for the good of the kingdom, so perhaps they would not be dissolved in his own lifetime. Yet, as Orstoll's power grew and other nations proved they could function and flourish without robust intelligence networks, he wished that the Grass could return to more humane lifestyles.

It was his plan to take on Heath to assist in espionage, but he also planned to fully support her no matter what she ended up being; if she grew as brawny as her classmates, he would gladly help her become a brave knight.

Her eyes opened wide in absolute shock when he told her she was accepted. This was the first time in her life anyone had ever said to her, "I need you."

She smiled in pure delight and said, "Yes, Cap'n!"

Later, as Roy fulfilled his duties as the king, he watched over Fie in her role as a squire. She was a hard worker, even in spite of possessing less stamina than the rest of her peers. She never gave up and made every effort to keep pace with her classmates. Now that Roy thought about it, he realized that she was no ordinary girl if she had kept pace with all these teenage boys with their eyes on the knighthood. At the time, unaware of her true identity as he had been, Roy found himself unexpectedly eager to give her advice.

With her eagerness, she soon assimilated into the squire community. Roy listened to her periodic life updates; he found it enjoyable to see the world from her perspective. In her eyes, life in Wienne possessed a kind of radiance, and when her face lit up with that same radiance as she talked, he felt like he was discovering a precious gem. The Orstoll of Roy's mind was still riddled with problems and brimming with criminals who preyed on the weak. Whenever Roy and his knights cracked down on a criminal here, two more sprang up to take their place over there. Worse, no matter how many problems they solved within their sphere of influence, Roy knew plenty of innocents lived just out of his reach in the Dark Dominion. If he looked at it through an objective lens, he could not say that Orstoll was a particularly good kingdom. However, whenever he was with Fie, he felt that maybe it had the potential to become one. He had tried to support her, but, looking back on it, maybe Roy was the one who had been supported all along.

Fie had had so many adventures. Roy was overjoyed whenever he heard about the times she went out with the platoon to learn more about their various duties or studied in the library with her friends. It worried him that the castle library was so infrequently used, despite it being open to all members of the public. Later, during the East—North Interdormitory Duel, she told him about her unfortunate disqualification in spite of doing an incredible job on landing a hit against her much stronger opponent. A pity, Roy thought, that she was bound to the rules of the competition.

The two spent more and more time together as knight captain and squire—him listening seriously as she recounted the tales of her day with her eyes gleaming; her coming to him for advice in times of trouble; both joining their friends in the rest of the platoon in going out to eat. Come to think of it, they'd even squabbled before too. He remembered Fie yelling at him, "Captain Yore, you're such an idiot!" the time he coldly turned the maid away. (Thinking back on it now, he had to agree with this assessment of him.)

Whenever he finished his kingly duties for the day, Roy donned his mask and walked to the guardroom on the edge of the castle grounds in order to meet with a certain small, blonde teenager. As he arrived, she turned to meet him

and, with a wide grin, cried, “Captain!” She rushed over to Roy, her face beaming joy and eyes twinkling, ready to regale Roy with the stories of her latest adventures.

Looking back on those fond memories now, Roy realized with a sudden jolt of surprise that he was smiling. Others frequently called him an expressionless man, and yet the corners of his mouth, so unused to levity, now relaxed into a curve. Roy did not often find much worth smiling at. He enjoyed seeing commoners smile, as such smiles were simple representations of joy, but Roy was far too used to the nobility fawning over him with flattering grins. He was the king, and it was vital that others understood his absolute authority, even if it required him to be intimidating at smiles. Pointless smiling meant weakness. And yet...why was he smiling now? He searched his mind and soon found the reason—because he was happy.

Born the crown prince, Roy had spent his whole life with the understanding that he should be a great king and raise a great kingdom. However, if he could have but one selfish wish, a single desire to do something for himself, Roy wanted to make for Heath...for Fie...a kingdom where she could live in happiness. This was his wish; not the king’s wish, *Roy’s* wish. And now it could never come true... Or perhaps this wish had been flawed from the beginning.

There in his tent with no other eyes upon him, a young man who had spent decades of his life knowing he should be king heaved a sigh and gave the very first personal smile of his life.

The news of the end of the war and Roy’s homecoming reached Fie back in Wienne.

“King Roy is on his way home,” said one of the maids, giggling. “Your Majesty, isn’t this a good opportunity to change your clothes?”

The maids were in high spirits as they tried to make Fie change into yet another new dress. (“Yet another” being the operative term, as this was the third time this day alone.) They had also already brushed her hair to death and even forced her into wearing a light coat of makeup.

Ugh. Fie groaned internally. *What a waste of time.* It made no sense to her why they kept dolling her up, but hey, she thought, when in Rome. Thus, she let the maids do as they pleased. Besides, she had bigger fish to fry, namely her plan to marry Queen.

She ran into trouble right out of the gate because, after all, she was already King Roy's second wife. His first wife was not in the picture right now, but...well, there was no need to drag Fielle into this. At any rate, Fie assumed that Roy might very well refuse her request for divorce, as losing his second wife would tarnish his reputation. She also thought he might be angry at her because, for lack of a better word, she had jilted him. Additionally, her biggest concern was that Queen might end up punished in some way due to carrying on an affair with her while she was still married. With all these myriad worries, Fie wasn't sure how to broach the topic but ultimately decided to come straight out and ask him for a divorce directly. That, Fie thought, would probably be the best approach.

Roy occupied Fie's mind during her absence, partially due to her promise to marry Queen but also partially due to her own interests. She didn't resent him any longer; she had forgiven him, although, she thought, that might have been a result of her guilt in having Captain Yore, of all people, apologizing to her. As such, it was little wonder how much time she spent thinking about him, and her time here in Orstoll, in his absence.

She had first arrived in Orstoll with no reception beyond being chucked into the consort's chambers, unable to get a single word in. Thinking back on it now, she recognized that this had King Roy's—no, Captain Yore's—name written all over it. She had witnessed firsthand (and subsequently told him off about) multiple times back when she was a squire just how poorly he treated women.

Afterwards, her head chef had begged to go on leave, and her supply of food ran out. Looking back, she realized this was also partially her fault; she should have reached out to someone and raised a stink about it. Even now, she didn't think her door guards had been the most trustworthy of people, but surely if she had kicked up enough of a fuss, news of it would have reached King Roy's ear somehow. He was the kind of person who would have sent someone to help her, as Fie now knew. She no longer believed in handling everything herself, but

that was because she had met so many caring adults during her time as a squire; prior to that, her hopeless life had made her such a misanthrope that asking for help was out of the question. Yet now Fie understood the true solution to her problems.

(When told this, Lynette responded, “Nonsense! It is entirely His Majesty’s fault!”)

Later, her captain recruited her into the 18th platoon, much to her joy. It was the first time she had ever been needed. Then the life of her dreams began. It was one short year, but it was the best year of her life. There she met Captain Yore, Crow, the other knights of the 18th platoon, then Gormus, Remie, Slad, Gees, and finally Queen—each and every one of them important to her. If any one of them ended up in trouble, she’d drop everything to rush to their aid. If any one of them wanted for anything, she’d see to it that their wishes were fulfilled. That was why she needed to do her best for Queen and the man who built this wonderful kingdom. That was why she chose to talk with King Roy face-to-face. This was her solution, the reason she chose to speak to the man who was both her king and her beloved captain: trust.

“According to a messenger on horseback, His Majesty is less than three days away,” the maid reported happily. Rightfully speaking, news of this sort (and the matter of welcoming the king upon his return) should have gone to his first wife. *Sure, Fie thought, Fielle isn’t married to him, so I get why they don’t bring it up with her. But why me? I’m only his second wife.* And hadn’t the chancellor said he wanted her to become Roy’s first wife and queen? *Me, Roy’s first wife?* Fie didn’t understand why he wanted that. Having everyone welcome her was such a vast difference from when she first arrived. She couldn’t help but feel just a tad peeved that they changed their minds on her so abruptly, but she tried not to let it bother her too much. Everyone made mistakes, as Fie well knew, being both a victim of being mistaken and a mistake maker herself.

And, more importantly, she needed to do her best for Queen. She steeled herself for an even bigger challenge to come. *All right, she thought, let’s do this!* She was ready. It was time to take up arms!

Unfortunately, that thought translated to her putting up her literal arms.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty,” the maid said. “Please lower your arms. I can’t change your dress like this.”

Fie quickly dropped them both.

Wienne bestowed a warm welcome upon Roy on his return. While it warmed his heart, he was more concerned with hurrying home to the palace to see Fie.

With the rebellion suppressed, Roy now had plenty of information that pointed to the king of Divine Luciana as the one responsible for the failed insurrection. Tomas, while still unconscious, was also recovering, likely due to the influence of Fielle’s healing powers. This brought the whole incident just about to a close.

This only left the issue of Fie, otherwise known as the girl who was only wrapped up in this mess because of Roy. During his journey home, he decided that the solution to this problem would be to ensure her continued happiness by every means necessary. No matter how many times he failed in this pursuit, he vowed to never give up. His relationship with her as king and consort had failed, and his relationship with her as knight commander and squire had been built on the back of lies. However, if they were to live as ordinary husband and wife... Well, it might not have been exactly what she wanted, but he was sure that he could make her happy as her husband.

He rushed to tell her this conclusion he had come to. As he scurried along, he tried to find the right words to tell her, but nothing seemed like it would work. *I’d like for you to become my first wife and queen, for I swear that I’ll make you happy... No, that’s not it.* That sounded too much like he wanted her to be his wife for the kingdom’s sake. Her happiness was the top priority, not being the queen consort. However, keeping her only as a second wife felt too much like preserving the unfortunate state he placed her in, and that, he fretted, wasn’t any good either. This might have been the first time in his life he had ever worried about what to say to a girl. *I’ll make you happy. I want you to let me make it up to you... In order to do that, I can’t have you stay as my second wife any longer. Of course, I don’t want to force this on you, but... No, I’m just blathering at this point.*

The chamberlain led Roy, still puzzling away, to the room where Fie awaited him. Roy stopped before the door, hoping to buy himself some more time to think, but then shook his head and pushed on. *If I say that, he thought, aren't I disrespecting her? I'll tell her that now I'm going to make her happy, and I want her to be my first wife and queen. It's best if I say it outright and get it over with.*

The door swung open, and there was Fie. A far cry from the boy he had once known as a squire, she was clothed in a dress, and looked every inch the lady like he had seen many times since.

"Good to see you again!" she cried, breaking immediately into a delighted grin the moment he walked in. No matter how down she was feeling, a visit from Roy always put a smile on her face.

Roy looked likewise pleased to see her. "Fie!"

Fie jolted in surprise upon seeing Roy's smile and raised her hand to her mouth with sudden trepidation. Then, she steeled herself, squeezed her eyes shut, and yelled as apologetically as she could, "I'm sorry, Captain Yore! I want a divorce!"

The chamberlain and the maids, who had readied the room for a tender reunion between loving husband and wife, stood outside, blissfully unaware of this outburst. Inside the room, however, Roy was shaken to the core.

"I...see," he said finally. "Very well... I'll see to it that it's done."

"Um, Your Majesty, I do want to point out that it's not like I dislike you or anything," Fie clarified. She somewhat regretted yelling her demands so loudly. Objectively speaking, Fie and her husband didn't have a fantastic marital relationship (in the romantic sense, at any rate), and she didn't think that was something he ever wanted. Nevertheless, it was bold of her to ask him for a divorce. Yes, she did trust him, but she still worried over how he would respond. Maybe he would think her impudent for even asking, even if she had no say in being married in the first place. Additionally, a divorce could be a real hassle, what with all of the red tape and the tedious business of informing everyone else.

However, Roy agreed immediately which was, frankly, astonishing, yet relieving. He hadn't simply granted permission; he had gone the extra mile and

promised to take care of it himself. *There really is no one else like Captain Yore*, Fie thought. Her impression of him wasn't wrong after all.

Still, she had broached this with a bit more force than was strictly necessary, and as a result, Roy seemed rather...well, depressed.

"Um, you see," she explained, "back when I was a squire, I started dating a boy named Queen. Oh, that's right; you've met him before. Anyway, the thing is, we've been going steady for about half a year now."

There was once a time when Fie would have never even dreamed of asking for something like this. At the beginning, her relationship with Roy had been nothing more than him shutting her away, and her running off, and she had thought that was all it would ever be. Fate truly worked in mysterious ways. Despite her earlier enthusiasm, Fie now felt a kind of pain in her heart as she spoke. It compelled her to tell him the full truth.

"He was one of my best friends back when I was a squire, and he was always there for me. He says that he loves me dearly, and now he's terribly upset that all this happened. So, if I can, I want to make him happy in return by marrying him."

Once Roy heard the whole story, he said, "Very well. I'll speak to my subjects and persuade them to accept your new marriage." This, Roy thought, was at last the best way to make it up to her. Then he amended that. He still wanted dearly to make her happy; it was only that his method of doing so had changed. He wanted Fie's happiness in whatever form it took. He swore to do whatever it took to grant her wish, even if...even if it ever so slightly broke his heart.

A single tear of emotion ran down Fie's cheek as well. He had heard out her unreasonable request without anger and had sworn to help her. That he thought so highly of her made her truly, wonderfully happy, and her smile won out over any further tears.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm very glad I came to Orstoll and met you, Captain Yore. No, excuse me. I'm glad I met you, King Roy."

From there, the arrangements for Fie and Queen's marriage flew by at

breakneck speed. Rationally speaking, a marriage between a king's second wife and a promising young squire was next to impossible, but it was Roy's assertive attitude that made it happen.

First, Roy used part of his war victory speech to announce the truth about Fie and his prejudiced treatment of her. He confirmed that the widespread, groundless rumors about her were his fault and issued her an apology for everything he had done up until now. Then, he explained that Fie did not want to be his queen consort, which Roy had readily accepted.

This part of the speech had *not* been on the program, and every listener was scandalized, none more so than the chancellor, who spearheaded the dissenting voices. Roy had expected this reaction, but went ahead with the speech anyway, knowing Fie and Queen could not be married otherwise. His people's objections were fierce, but they were all on the level of, "Take it back right now" or "At least reconsider Her Majesty stepping down as the queen..." Roy failed to notice that all of the opposition stemmed from one primary concern—if Roy let this chance slip away from him, then when in the world would he *ever* marry?

Nevertheless, Roy stuck to his guns, shot down the opposing arguments, and continued to persuade his subjects to his (in a way, selfishly motivated) side. Compared to how he used to run the government as a dispassionate one-man show, the new Roy who argued for what he wanted and discussed next courses of action with his people was almost like a new man altogether.

As Roy worked his persuasive magic, word spread far and wide that Queen and Fie loved one another and wished to marry with the king's blessing. Eventually, all of Roy's most stubborn subjects bent to his will, save for one: the chancellor. As the unintentional spokesperson for those who wanted Fie to be queen, it took all of Roy's persuasion and all of Fie's pleading before the chancellor finally folded under their combined onslaught and agreed to approve of the match, on one condition.

Thereafter Roy and his subjects came to an agreement that a sudden divorce would be unhelpful. Therefore, they branded this arrangement as a sort of royal bestowal, allowing the eldest daughter of an aristocrat to remarry someone of lower status. Roy voiced his displeasure at the idea, as this put Fie in a

dishonorable position, but she wasn't overly concerned about that, giving the okay immediately. Besides, she thought, Queen would be happy to be with her no matter what fancy verbiage their wedding came couched in. Then, as was the chancellor's requirement, Fie was to take up the formal post of queen consort—temporarily, that is.

The date for Fie and Queen's wedding was set, taking into account various affairs in the kingdom, the requests of the populace, and Fie's own lackadaisical whims. In the meantime, she would remain married to Roy, up until he bestowed her to Queen as his wife. Incidentally, Queen was a bit too low of rank to receive such a "gift"; the Dober family were merely viscounts before Roy jumped Queen up to the title of a count. This was purely for the marriage's sake, but due to the combination of the common people's vulgarity and Fie's willingness to let the ends justify the means, it was framed as a reward for heroism displayed by this up-and-coming knight in the battles to suppress the duke's insurrection. As per the chancellor's wishes, Fie took up the post of queen consort in the interim, which meant that all of Fielle's former government duties now fell into her lap. As to what, exactly, the purpose of this was, none but the chancellor could say.

As Fie conducted herself as the queen, preparations continued for her wedding, with everyone in the kingdom preparing to celebrate her love when all was said and done. This, at least, was the plan.

The issue was that, after the initial proposal, everyone had collectively forgotten to ask Queen what, exactly, he might think about all this. Fie only learned where he was and what he was doing after she was already swamped in her queen work and wedding preparations. *I wonder what he's up to*, she suddenly thought. It turned out that no one in the palace had any idea, so the servants rushed to go find someone who did.

The report came back. "It appears he was injured in the war effort, Your Majesty."

"Injured?!" she cried, her face twisting in worry.

"Yes, Your Majesty. He was not paying attention and dropped something on

his foot.”

Her worried frown immediately shifted to one of displeasure. “Great,” she said. “Perfect timing. And here we are about to get even busier.”

Queen stayed in a nearby village until his foot recovered from the heavy block of wood he had dropped on it, whereupon he finally returned to Wienne. He had been away for one month and three weeks, and he hurried home as fast as he could, hoping to catch just a glimpse of Fie (among other sundry desires).

Unfortunately, nothing so simple awaited him upon return. For some reason, everyone he passed kept glancing at him repeatedly. *Do I have bed head or something?* he wondered. He tried to fix his hair with his reflection in a puddle, self-conscious in the way of any typical teenage boy about how he might appear in front of his crush.

Finally, he set off for the palace. At this point, everyone in the capital stared at him openly.

“Is that the great hero, Sir Queen...?” someone whispered.

“He’s the loyal knight who moved as fast as lightning and rescued the king from grave danger!” someone else whispered back.

Queen wondered what they were saying about him, but their voices were too low for him to make out. *Well, no matter*, he thought. He was used to drawing attention for his unusual looks, although, come to think of it, that had dropped off recently. So what was this all about? Queen walked through the streets of the capital, puzzling as he went, and entered the castle only to be mobbed by a pack of squires.

“Queen!” one howled. “Is it true that you and Heath—wait, no, Fie—are going to be married in two months?!”

“Yeah! And is the king really making you a count and giving you his wife as a royal gift?”

“And did you really injure yourself in covert operations in all that fighting earlier?!”

“Huh?” said Queen. “Huh?!”

What in the world? He didn’t even know where to begin. Yes, he had just barely agreed to marry Fie—no, scratch that. He had just barely made his desire to marry Fie known, but there had been zero discussion of anything as concrete as holding an actual wedding in two months.

Queen stood there, flabbergasted, and then he heard the voice he had been thinking about for weeks on end call, ever so casually, “Welcome home, Queen!”

He spun around, and there he saw Fie—dressed as a girl, not in her usual squire’s uniform, and surrounded by an entourage of servants and retainers. The fact that she was not the girl he knew from her time as a squire brought him a slight pang of discomfort, even as he realized she looked every inch a ruler.

The other boys cried out in shock when they saw her. “H-Heath?” one yelled. “No, wait, I mean...Your Majesty...”

Due to the fact that she was the only queen left and, in fact, technically King Roy’s queen consort all along, Fie was to remain queen until her wedding day. To outside observers, this was a rather pushy argument, but it certainly got the job done.

Fie waved at the other boys in her usual carefree way. “Long time no see, guys!” she said.

No one waved back. This was their queen, after all, but they still couldn’t quite wrap their heads around how to treat their resident-troublemaker-turned-monarch.

Do I need to bow? one boy wondered. *I mean, it’s only Heath we’re talking about here...*

I can’t make heads or tails of this, thought another.

This is weird, thought a third. *Downright absurd.*

A fourth thought, *Oh dammit. She’s actually cute when she wears a dress.*

She had grown her hair out in the few months of her absence and now looked

more like a girl. Yet, as she was comporting herself no differently, this only served to irritate the boys. Still, putting their irrational thoughts aside, they had heard that Fie was doing a surprisingly good job at being a queen.

Fie rushed over to Queen, her cheeks puffing up in anger.

“Geez, Queen! You caused me a lot of trouble by going and getting yourself hurt.”

“I-I’m sorry...” he said. His inner doggy ears drooped.

The maids, meanwhile, hung back but watched this exchange with great interest. One among them glared daggers at Queen with a look that read, “*I still don’t approve!*”

However, Lynette’s hostility didn’t put a damper on Fie and Queen’s conversation.

“*And you worried me,*” Fie said. Queen felt his cheeks begin to burn at how cute she looked.

She grabbed his hand in both of hers and began to tug him away. “In the meantime,” she said, “you’re going to help me, okay? I’ve been run ragged with all my work as the queen and preparing for our wedding.”

Even though he had barely returned home, he let himself be led away again, not altogether unwillingly. He was then subjected to an audience with the king and his ministers, wherein Queen was scrutinized and forced to recite fictional tales of his efforts on the battlefield (courtesy of a script received from Fie, authored by herself and edited by the chancellor). It took a toll on his mental state, but he had, after all, proclaimed his desire to marry the *queen*. He was lucky enough that he’d be able to marry her once this was all through. He therefore had no choice but to grin and bear it.

With that hurdle cleared, the two planned their wedding, even as they were occupied in their respective duties as queen and squire. The first task was to pick the wedding dress.

“Hey, whatcha think about this one?” Fie asked. She spread her arms out wide, letting Queen see the full, creamy white dress. Today’s dress selection

was courtesy of an artisan who had tailored his works to the royal family's needs and had prepared multiple garments for Fie to try on today.

The whole kingdom was now in support of their marriage, with the populace desperately eager to throw the grandest wedding ceremony possible. After all, it simply wouldn't do to let their wedding be a tawdry affair! Rather than let it be all hush-hush, the people of Orstoll had decided to hold the wedding with almost uncomfortable zeal. (And with that being said, let us return to the happy couple themselves.)

"Y-You look beautiful..." Queen breathed, with a dopey, lovestruck grin. The prospect of their imminent wedding had him over the moon.

Fielle, who for some reason had insisted on coming along to pick out the wedding dress, likewise happily chimed in with, "Fie, you look magnificent!" Fielle now lived in Orstoll as an honored guest, and Tomas's condition continued to improve by the day.

With the wedding dress shopping complete, Queen returned to his dorm to find the other boys awaiting his arrival with respectful bows.

"It is a pleasure to receive you in our humble home, lord hero," said one squire.

"We of the squirehood have awaited your return most anxiously, Sir Queen."

"Do please let us relieve you of your things. A great hero who did so much for us in the war efforts mustn't carry his own bags."

Oh, great—the squires had gotten wind of the story Fie had made up to let Queen marry her. Of course, all the boys, having been with Queen during the war, knew it was a load of hogwash. He had tried to explain it all to them, but the boys—knowing Queen had gone overnight from a simple boyfriend to a fiancé of a girl who was, admittedly, rather cute (never mind the issue of her personality)—refused to hear a word of it. Of course, they wholeheartedly supported their friend's love, but there was no room in their hearts for simple joy when none of them had even had their first girlfriend yet, dammit! Naturally, the only reasonable action was to support their boy while mercilessly teasing the everlasting life out of him.

“Come on, guys, cut it out...” Gormus said, the only one refraining from this tomfoolery.

Queen, meanwhile, looked miserable. Despite his considerable strength, Queen was a fairly naive young man, still oblivious to the ways of the world, and one who dearly yearned for the day he could perform brave deeds like the knights in his favorite fairy tales. Being teased for a made-up tale of heroic deeds hurt as badly as a pack of wild animals ripping out his guts.

“Come, brave hero!” a squire cried as he stepped up to Queen’s side. “What noble deeds will you perform this fine eveni—?”

Frustrated, Queen grabbed the boy’s arm and bit it as hard as he could. The boy screeched in surprise and pain.

The other boys cried out in fear. They had never seen Queen this angry before!

“Aaah!” one yelled. “Queen’s gone feral!”

“Wait a minute! I’m not the one who planned this!” screamed the bitten boy. “You gotta believe me, this was *his* idea!”

“Wait, you filthy liar! Weren’t you the one who suggested this idea at the last meeting of the Forever Alone Alliance?”

Now presented for the first time ever with an angry Queen, the north dorm descended into chaos. (Later, this went down in squire history as the queen and Queen’s marriage incident.) From then on, the squires switched their policy to support Queen’s love without any of their former jealousy.

In the midst of this and other misadventures, Queen and Fie went into town incognito to look at wedding rings. Every other aspect of the wedding was being paid for by the royal family, but Queen wanted to buy at least the wedding ring with his own money. It was a symbol of their marriage, something Fie would have on her for life.

Now that they looked, they both realized that wedding rings were awfully expensive to purchase on a squire’s allowance. Fie, fully aware of the limits of Queen’s wallet, said, “I’m okay with a cheap one. Besides, I don’t really feel like

jewelry looks all that good on me, you know?”

Nonsense, Queen thought. *A beautiful ring on a beautiful girl—what’s not to like?*

This was Queen’s chance to demonstrate his ability to provide for her. “It’s fine,” he said. “I’ll make it work.” The time had come, he decided, to use the card up his sleeve—the inheritance he had received from his parents. They had both passed away when he was quite young, but they had left him all the assets of their noble family. He normally saved the money to be used for his future or to manage his family’s lands, but spending it on the young woman who was soon to be a part of that family did not seem out of line.

He silently thanked his parents as he carefully scrutinized the array of gemstones. He then chose a pair of rings whose jewels matched the sapphire blue of Fie’s eyes. “What do you think about these?” he asked.

They were quite expensive, and Fie was about to balk at the cost, but the look on Queen’s face made the words die in her throat. He looked so gravely earnest that Fie, even without much of an interest in jewels, decided that she would treasure this ring for life.

While the shopkeeper retrieved the rings from their shelf, Fie spotted another pair of rings that she thought she could afford with the money she had on her. “Excuse me,” she said to the clerk. “I’d like to get these too.”

“Fie?” Queen asked, startled.

She grinned at him. “These can be our engagement rings. We can’t wear our wedding rings yet, and we don’t have anything else to wear in the meantime, right?”

Granted, Fie and Queen made for a rather unusual pair of fiancés, but they had indeed sworn to marry one another and yet did not have anything to show for it. Buying engagement rings would remedy that issue.

“I-In that case,” Queen said, ever eager to bear the financial burden, “let me pay!”

Fie waved him away with a “It’s fine. I’ve got this.”

She placed their wedding rings in a little box to be worn later, but took the engagement rings and gave one to Queen. Then, she put the other on the ring finger of her left hand.

“Look,” she said. “We’re matching.”

Seeing the ring on her finger, Queen hurried and put his on as well. The two matching rings gleamed on their hands.

“They look wonderful on you both,” the shopkeeper gushed, watching the young, innocent couple.

Then, with Queen carefully cradling the wedding ring box, the two left the shop, a perfect matching pair.

Fie left Orstoll and paid a visit to a small yet culturally rich kingdom known as Themis. Like Daeman, Themis was a country with a long history but little national power; however, unlike Daeman with its lazy decline into degeneracy, Themis still maintained a strong influence on other nations, thanks to its king’s impressive diplomatic ability.

The major powers of the world met in Themis once every three years for a conference. There was an encroaching war with the people from the adjoining continent to the east, a matter in need of addressing along with how to protect any presently untouched lands from invasion, and what contributions could be made for the stability of each respective kingdom.

Fie sat at Roy’s side at the round conference table as she was, of course, his queen consort. The conference had already begun. Roy participated in the discussions seriously, and Fie likewise responded with clever replies whenever the conversation came her way.

There was another man sitting at their table who kept making intermittent glances at them. He was King Geras of Divine Luciana, the culprit behind the duke’s rebellion and the attempts on Fielle and Tomas’s lives. Now that she saw him up close, she realized with a sigh that he was truly a pathetic sort of man. Even when the conversation was directed at him, he ignored the other conference participants and remained fixated on Fie and Roy. This odd behavior

did not go unnoticed by the other attendees, particularly in light of Roy's open participation in the discussion. Clearly, he did not have many thoughts to share in the first place, which was evident by the foolish actions on his part that had started this entire feud. Unfortunately, these actions had hurt many other people, including Fielle. Fie wanted to slap him silly, but she feigned composure and continued to participate in the conference.

When the conference ended and he knew she could do nothing to him, Geras looked blatantly relieved, turning to Fie with a triumphant smirk. Other kingdoms were aware of the duke's insurrection in Orstoll, and it had been discussed at today's conference. Roy reported that he successfully suppressed the uprising without needless casualties and that his kingdom was now in good, stable hands once more. Geras had wondered if Roy would blame him for starting the conflict, but, mercifully, neither Fie nor Roy mentioned any such thing. Fie and Roy had more than enough evidence to indict him for his crimes, but their failure to do so was Geras's saving grace. Or maybe, he wondered, did Roy simply wish to avoid all-out war with such a major power as Divine Luciana? Either way, it came out to be a win for Geras.

Yet little did Geras know that he completely misunderstood Roy's so-called failure. He would only realize his mistake on the way home, and by that point, it would be too late. After chiding his adjutant, who had left partway through the conference without saying a word, he set off for home in high spirits.

Geras chuckled to himself. "You fool, Roy," he said. "Did you not have the courage to indict me, the rightful king of Divine Luciana, for my crimes? Or did you simply not have any proof?" He chuckled again. "It makes no difference either way. The throne is still mine."

He smirked victoriously as his carriage rattled along, bearing him towards home. In fact, Geras had been unable to achieve his goal of murdering Fielle, and Roy had smashed every one of his other plans. Yet it was less that he did not care about those foiled plots any longer and more that he had completely forgotten. He had conspired against Fielle and Tomas out of rage at having been jilted by a girl who would have raised his prestige even further. But that rage had long since subsided, and the moment he thought he had escaped the

clutches of those investigating the crime, he was nothing but pleased. The mere thought of having made a successful escape put him in a fine mind. (He was a very foolish and thus a very happy man.)

Yet even for all his foolishness, he still noticed when the carriage suddenly turned off from the road leading up the castle.

“Hmm?” he said. “What’s all this about? This isn’t the right road. Hey, driver, what’re you doing up there? If you can’t drive this darn thing properly, I’ll have you sent to jail!”

The carriage trundled into a thick forest, swaying from side to side so vigorously that Geras had to cling to the window for support. The carriage then stopped in the middle of the woods, only trees as far as the eye could see. An entourage of guards was supposed to accompany the carriage, but this sudden maneuver had left them all behind in the dust.

Geras rounded on and barked at the adjutant riding along with him. “Hey! What’s going on here?”

Just then, he felt a cold object stab into his neck. He spluttered in shock and pain. It was a knife, a knife in the hands of his trusted (to the extent that Geras could never, not in his wildest dreams, have imagined she would do this) adjutant.

The adjutant stared down at the king through her glasses with cold, emotionless eyes.

“During the conference, the king of Orstoll gave me a set of documents which detailed all of your evil deeds throughout this past year. The king informed me that he did not wish for our respective kingdoms to have a hostile relationship with one another. This, you must understand, was a request to depose you. A messenger on a fast horse has already informed our people, and your younger brother has now staged a coup. The armies surrendered peacefully, and the throne is now his. Now you will die in an accident and preserve our kingdom’s honor.”

“H-How could...you...Zaruhi?” the king managed to ask.

“Farewell, Your Majesty. You were always a foolish king, but had you not

lowered yourself to the level of such folly... I would have followed you to the farthest ends of the world.” The adjutant’s voice was choked with sorrow, and it finally trailed away into silence. The coach’s door never opened again.

Fie yawned widely the moment the latest petitioner stepped out.

“Your Highness, that is most improper.” A lady-in-waiting tutted.

Fie grinned at her. “Sorry, sorry.”

The conference was over, and Fie was back home once again serving as the queen. Roy handled all of the most important tasks and administrative matters himself, but he delegated to her all of the lesser audiences and public relations duties. This had once been Fielle’s job, but in conjunction with the level of freedom given to her, Fie found herself surprisingly adept at this sort of work. Her reputation within the palace had likewise soared to the extent that she now had people begging her to stay around as the queen forever. In spite of that, everyone still supported her upcoming wedding. Considering how grave her crime was, everyone thought that the fact she had risked grave punishment to appeal to the king directly to marry Queen showed just how much she loved him. Many threw themselves enthusiastically into granting her wish in order to make up for the terrible rumors they had once spread about her.

The people of Orstoll had such a lovely, heroic image of Fie, but Fie herself was presently daydreaming about going to the 18th knights’ guardroom to goof off. There wasn’t anything explicitly prohibiting her from doing so, but being the queen meant that no matter where she went, she was sure to be hounded by people who wanted to talk to her. So much for her freedom of movement.

“Your next task, Your Highness,” said the lady-in-waiting, “will be to take tea in the courtyard with Her Majesty Meloty, the Queen Mother of Thales.”

“If you say so,” Fie grumbled.

Having a tea party with Queen Meloty was the second most boring task in the whole job, as a good ninety percent of the conversation was made up of gossip about people Fie had never met. It was not so much a party (thankfully, as Fie was a bit of a wallflower at parties), but it kept her in the spotlight of attention

and that, she thought, was bad enough. However, she eventually picked up on the fact that these tea “parties” (tea reluctant conversations with the queen of Thales, perhaps?) were a gradual effort to repair the relationship between Orstoll and Thales, as they were once close neighbors with blood ties before the old king drove them apart.

“This is a present for Her Majesty,” the lady-in-waiting told her. “Also, please wear the hairpin Her Majesty gifted you. It will make her ever so happy.”

At first, the ladies-in-waiting and the maids had been baffled by the attitudes Fie had picked up from her squire days, but now they were prepared to take her sulking in stride. Though she complained, she’d still do the job right even when put on the spot. She was simply being honest about her feelings. Even though Fie sometimes acted in some very unladylike ways, the stuffy old queen still rather liked her.

I wish I had noticed sooner who Her Majesty really is, thought the maid doing up Fie’s hair. *Will I still be able to stay on with her after she’s gone and married?* As lonely as this thought was, she quietly vowed to support Fie’s romantic affair with all of her heart.

Once Fie was appropriately dolled up, she set off for the courtyard where Queen Meloty was waiting for her, happening to pass by the north dorm along the way.

“Hey!” one of the squires called. “We’re going into town for the red string festival! Anyone who wants to go had better get over here!”

Fie stopped in her tracks as the fond memory of those bygone days rolled over her. Her feet instinctively began to carry her towards the dorm. She knew she couldn’t go back to them, she knew she had to give up, but she still wondered if someday she couldn’t return to them.

As Fie watched, the boys gathered in a joyous crowd. “Queen!” one of them called. “Come with us!”

Queen was there too, and he protested, “N-No, I can’t...”

“We can’t beat the thirty year reigning champ without you! C’mon, man, please!”

“Yeah! You’re the only one who can pull it off!” said another squire. “You’re our only hope!”

“F-Fine...” Queen muttered.

With Queen in tow, the squires moved off in one enormous flock to go have fun.

Fie’s maids spied their mistress unable to take her eyes off of Queen. They smiled fondly. Ah, there was nothing like watching one’s loved one! But then Fie puffed her cheeks in indignation. “Y-Your Majesty?” cried the maids. Wasn’t she looking at Queen?

Of all the unfair things! Fie thought. Here she was, slaving her butt off as a queen just so she could marry Queen, because she cared about Queen so much (mind you, it wasn’t just for him—but that was beside the point!), and that was all very well and good. But when she stepped back and thought about it, it wasn’t fair! What did she get from this? Nothing!

“Hmmp!” She snarled.

The maids, having only known her for a month, did not have the faintest idea what was happening and couldn’t say so much as a word in response.

Suddenly, Queen found himself unable to meet with Fie. He was now the center of attention, what with marrying the woman recognized as the kingdom’s queen, but he did not let it go to his head. He still had to become a brave knight and find a way to provide for his and Fie’s life together. Thus he proceeded to calmly go about his training as he steadily checked off every item on the wedding preparation task list.

He met with King Roy once during the wedding preparations. His relationship with the king was very complicated as, by marrying Fie, he now had the authority to meet with a man no mere squire could ever dream of talking to. Also, in being a knight, Queen hoped to pledge his support to the king, whose sword skills he admired. And then, to top it all off, Roy was now also Queen’s (sort of) rival in love.

All this was enough to set Queen on edge, but Roy only gave Queen a smile

that was as gentle as could be as they stood before each other. “I’m afraid I caused her terrible harm,” the king said. “It is perhaps not my place to say this, but please—make her happy for me.”

It was with this that Queen knew Roy truly regretted his actions and only wanted the best for Fie from now on. What happened in the past must have been a big misunderstanding or miscommunication—maybe a simple one, maybe a complex one, but either way, had it not happened, Queen would never have been lucky enough to meet Fie. Therefore, Queen decided to cherish this moment.

“I will,” he said.

And yet, despite his resolution, for some reason he couldn’t see her any more. As busy as she was, most of their meetings were arranged by her, and those invitations had all dried up. Furthermore, while he had heard she was occupied with planning the wedding, as far as he knew, all the prep work was done. Besides, it struck him as odd that she hadn’t invited him to help.

The wedding was now only three weeks away and rapidly approaching. So why had she abruptly cut him off? Maybe, he thought with horror, she regretted asking him to marry her. He wasn’t even a full knight yet, and on top of that, the whole kingdom loved having her as their queen. Besides, her relationship with the king wasn’t that bad either. It would make sense that she wanted to call off the wedding. After all, King Roy was already an incredibly brave knight, not to mention handsome, tall, and far more politically powerful than Queen. Queen couldn’t think of a single way in which he had the edge over Roy. His anxiety grew worse with every passing moment.

The other squires saw Queen looking depressed and decided to offer their expert analysis on the situation.

“Maybe she’s getting cold feet,” one of them said.

“You really think she’s the kind of person to get cold feet about anything?” said another.

In the end, none of them came up with satisfactory answers.

It was now two weeks since Queen had last seen Fie, and only one week

remained before their wedding. Preparations were well underway for Fie to step down and be granted to Queen. Oddly, nothing seemed to be going wrong, apart from Fie not letting Queen see her. Even the other participants in the planning process hadn't noticed any particular issues. From an objective perspective, their wedding looked like it would come off without a hitch—so what was going on?

The day came for their clothes fitting, and the maids came to help Queen prepare. Considering the formality of the ceremony, he had quite a bit of his own prep work to do. Although he refused help in the dressing itself, he allowed them to work their magic to ensure his shirt was free of wrinkles, choose the accessories for him to wear on the day of the wedding, and apply a light coat of makeup on his face for the first time in his life.

“We put in an order to a kingdom in the southeast to acquire this for you,” a maid told him, holding up a pot of powder that matched his skin tone.

“O-Okay...” he said.

The maids were having a grand old time as they applied the powder to his face. These maids were the same ones who served Fie, which meant they knew quite a lot about him already. He felt like he was at one of those family gatherings wherein his most distant relatives spent the entire time talking about him in elaborate detail.

“We understand that marriage is a sensitive topic for most gentlemen,” the maid went on, “but you must never, ever cheat on her if you know what’s good for you.”

“I would never,” Queen said. (And if anything, now Queen was the one worried about that! He knew she wasn't the type to cheat, but if she ever did come across a new man, she'd probably just dump Queen outright.)

Also, why didn't she want to speak to him? And—this was his biggest concern—why didn't anyone else act like something was wrong? This was giving him a constant headache as the wedding approached. All he heard of her was that she was preparing for the wedding. But what in the world could she be doing up to the day before the ceremony? And without Queen, no less!

After dutifully finishing another day of training, he returned to his dorm room,

his thoughts gloomy. *I don't understand what she's thinking...*

Then he noticed a piece of paper wedged in his door. His eyes grew wide as he saw the words "To Queen" written on it. *That's Fie's handwriting!* Frantically, he unfolded the paper and read:

Dear Mr. Queen Dober, the promising squire I've spent so many lovely days with,

I challenge you to a duel. I will meet you tonight at the designated location.

Yours,

Heath

He was supposed to be engaged to her, not engaged in battle with her! *Nope*, he thought. *I really don't understand what she's thinking.* (And really, could anyone blame him?)

Chapter 33 — Not That Everyone’s Really Gotten the Full Picture

That night, Queen came to the designated location: an old, stone ruin on the palace grounds that no one used anymore. There had been talk of demolishing it, but the place had historical value (insofar as anything in Orstoll could) and as such, no one had gotten around to tearing it down yet. The place was silent and appeared to be deserted.

“Fie?” Queen called. Something flashed before his eyes with a sharp whistle of wind in response. An arrow! It was a training arrow with its rounded tip blunted by cloth, but it would still hurt if it hit its mark.

Queen froze in shock as a voice issued from the ruins. “Queen Dober!” the voice cried. “I challenge you to a duel! If I win, then you will give up your position as a squire and bequeath it to me!” It was, of course, Fie’s voice.

“Uh...what...?” Queen said. That was an impossible request. Even if Fie won and Queen tried to yield his squire rights, she still couldn’t be a squire again.

A second volley of arrows whirred past him, one after the other in quick succession. Queen yelped and dashed for cover behind a nearby tree.

“What are you doing, Fie?!“ he yelled.

“I’m dueling you!” she screamed back.

Queen looked pained. “This is dangerous! Stop!”

“No! But you are free to try scaling my fortress and taking me down!”

“But tomorrow’s our wedding!”

“If you want to marry me, you’d better defeat me first!”

There was no point in arguing with her any further. With a clicking sound like someone had pulled a lever, a number of wooden spears rained down from the tree Queen was hiding under. He leaped out of the way, stumbling over a

wooden practice sword lying at his feet. This, Queen thought, must be his weapon. Queen grabbed the sword and then looked up at Fie's so-called fortress. He wasn't entirely sure how this was supposed to play out, but it looked as if he'd need to climb to the top of the ruin in order to find her.

He stepped in through the long since doorless entrance and immediately fell into a pit. A trap! He flailed and kicked off the sides of the pit, managing to escape with his impressive physical abilities. Just as he did, another rain of arrows whizzed down at him from the upper story. Queen batted them away with his sword.

He peered farther into the room. The stairway up was blocked off with rocks, but, as he saw when he ducked out to check, the outside staircase was still clear. The moment he stepped foot on the stairs, a thick wooden spear surged out of the wall towards him. He stepped back and heard a clang as an iron shackle clamped closed around his foot. The shackle was attached to a heavy weight with long chains, the whole setup locked in such a way that Queen knew it would be challenging to escape from. Queen's mobility was his weapon, and now that mobility was restricted.

Fie called out to him, "This is what I've been preparing these past two weeks. If you underestimate me, you'll be in for a world of pain!"

Even with his foot bound as it was, Queen gingerly began to climb the stairs. He had no idea why this was happening, but he'd worry about that later. For now, all he needed was to make it to the top floor and find Fie.

Much to his relief, the stairs seemed like they would be out of the line of fire of her arrows; even weighed down as he was, he only needed to watch out for traps. Just then, he heard a whistling noise unlike anything that he had ever heard before. It was a strange weapon shaped like the letter V, which was called—although Queen didn't know the name—a boomerang. The boomerang traveled in an odd arc and bore down on Queen. He panicked and scrambled away, his encumbered right foot trailing behind him. Unlike Queen, who only ever learned to use a sword, the older knights had taught Fie to use all sorts of weapons as a method of overcoming her comparative lack of physical strength, or so she had claimed. Queen now realized that wasn't just a bluff.

I guess I have no choice, he thought. He wound up the trailing chains and charged up the flight of stairs. No weight could rob Queen of his agility. He dodged the boomerang, another rain of arrows, and even more traps as he ran.

Then he arrived at the top floor and gasped. There Fie stood behind a ring of fortifications, traps and fences meant to block anyone coming her way, a specially made pike in her hand.

“What is all this for...?” he asked.

Her face was hidden in shadow as she answered, “Because it’s not fair...”

“What’s not fair?” Was it something he’d done? He couldn’t recall doing anything unfair to her. He had done his very best in his knight training and wedding preparations for Fie’s sake, hadn’t he?

Instead of answering, she stabbed at him with the pike. It was very clearly a deliberate action, no hastily made decision on her part. Queen tried to duck to avoid the pike, but the traps and fences blocked his way, forcing him to stay within her range and take the blow.

As he tried to dodge, he yelled, “Tell me why you’re attacking me! If I did something wrong, I’ll apologize!”

Fie roared back, “I challenged you to a duel! You’re not supposed to just stand there talking with me! If you want to talk to me, you’ll have to defeat me first!”

Even in the midst of her fury, she sounded as if she was on the verge of tears. Queen wanted to run over and see if she was all right, but her defenses and the pike prevented him from getting any closer.

A duel... He had likewise challenged her to a duel upon their very first meeting. (Not that she ever took him up on the offer.)

Nevertheless, Queen steeled his resolve. He dodged the next thrust from the pike and broke out into a run as if the chain on his leg wasn’t weighing on him in the slightest. There wasn’t a place to stand without a trap or a fence in the way, so Queen leaped on top of the fences, running along them with an animal-like balance and hurtling over any traps in his path.

A set of weights on strings—weapons called bolas, yet another of Fie’s

proficiencies—flew at him. Queen caught them with his sword, and the bolas wrapped themselves around the blade. Perfectly timed, Fie jabbed at him with the pike just as he was about to hit the ground. He tried to deflect it with his sword, but the bola weights made it too heavy and unwieldy for him to maneuver properly. Realizing that the pike would hit, he twisted in midair to buy himself an extra second. The pike hit only air, and in that moment, Queen landed and yanked the bolas off his sword.

Finally, he squared off against Fie. The battle was still not over, and Fie switched her weapon to her trusty practice sword. Then she came at him, yelling again, “It’s not fair!”

The two had faced off against one another countless times in training, and thus Queen knew how to dodge her familiar attacks.

“You have all the talent!” she howled. “You have all the skill! Everyone expects you to do great things! And after we’re married, you’re just going to leave me behind and run off to be a knight!”

She continued to buffet him with blows as he twisted and dodged. This, too, was very much like their usual sparring matches, Fie pouring everything into her one-sided offense with Queen easily dodging each of her attacks. The fact that Queen never fought back infuriated her. He was not an opponent she could defeat in open combat, hence why she challenged him with all the traps and know-how she had at her disposal. And yet, no matter what she did, she was little match for him.

She had spent enough time with Queen to know that this wasn’t a totally effortless battle for him. But it was only a typical amount of exertion; Queen could be working harder if he wanted to. And Fie was making an effort as well. She knew she could never defeat him in sheer physical strength, so she tried and tried and *tried* to think up ways to compensate for her shortcomings, but she still couldn’t bridge this gap between them.

The reason for Queen’s strength was evident; he possessed a brilliant natural talent. He was strong just by virtue of being Queen. And Fie, by virtue of being Fie, was no match for him.

“I’ve worked so hard!” she yelled. “For a whole year, I put in so much effort,

and yet!”

Suddenly, the moonlight illuminated her face, and Queen could see the tears in her eyes.

“And yet I can’t be a knight! Even though I worked just as hard as any one of you, I can’t be a knight!”

Finally, Queen understood.

Once they married, the two of them would begin to walk down their respective paths in life together, but the path of the knighthood would remain open only to Queen. Here, Fie’s life would diverge and go in a different direction. Queen had witnessed all the hard work she had put into becoming a knight, but her whole year of effort now came to nothing.

How could he possibly respond to this? He opened his mouth, hoping to give her some words of comfort, and then closed it once more when the answer came to him. Fie was no damsel in distress needing a brave knight’s rescue.

Instead, Queen lifted his sword and swung at her with all his strength to turn her blade. Her sword was swept from her hand and sent wheeling through the air. She tried to grab another weapon, but before she could retaliate, he slapped her forearm down with as much strength as he could, and she lost her grip. The pain brought fresh tears to her eyes, and she hesitated, unsure whether to reach for a different weapon with her other hand. Then she looked once more at Queen, bearing down on her with everything he had, and sighed in defeat. She knew that no matter what she tried, she stood little chance of winning. She had known that going into this battle; still, wasn’t it a victory of a sort if she managed to make Queen fight back for the first time? And yet...it was to be the first and last time.

“I guess our last match is another loss...” she whispered.

Then Queen pulled her into his arms and hugged her with all his might. At the top of his lungs, he vowed, “Fie, I swear that I will make you happy! Even if you don’t become a knight, I swear I will make you so happy that you won’t ever regret this! I swear! I swear that I won’t leave you alone! I promise!”

She looked down at the hand he had injured and smiled slightly. She nodded

and said, “I’ll hold you to that, mister.” Then she kissed him under the moonlight.



Their wedding was held the next day. While the people supported the match with as much excitement as if it was a royal wedding, they likewise mourned, with mounting desperation, that His Majesty was once again distancing himself from the only girl he had ever been close to, even if it had been for only a few scant months. But never mind about them. The squires, all the knights from the 18th platoon, Fie's various acquaintances, and Queen's relatives all showed up to watch what turned out to be quite a lovely ceremony.

Fie wore a lovely white wedding dress, one from the many she had tried on earlier. Queen's nervousness showed on his face, but he cleaned up well enough for the ceremony.

"You look gorgeous, Fie!" Fielle gushed.

"I *still* don't approve of this..." muttered Lynette as she took her seat with a stubborn scowl on her face.

Queen and Fie exchanged rings amid hearty applause. Fie wore a bandage tied around her right wrist. Queen gave it a worried look, but Fie only giggled. With nervous fingers, Queen took Fie's left hand and slid the wedding ring onto her finger.

"You may now kiss the bride," said the officiant.

Their faces met in front of the audience, and the crowd let out an enormous cheer.

The ceremony was followed by a fantastic reception, and then the castle once more fell silent. Zorace continued his work, as industrious as ever, when he heard a knock on the door of his office.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Me, Lord Uncle."

Zorace jolted in surprise when he heard Roy's voice from the other side of the door. The door opened, and Roy walked in with a bottle of wine clutched in his arms.

"Will you share a drink with me?" he asked.

Zorace immediately made to refuse—a king simply did not drink with his subjects—before he felt a sudden change of heart and stopped himself. Roy took his silence as acceptance and, setting the bottle and a pair of glasses down on the table, took a seat across from Zorace. Zorace let out a small sigh but nevertheless moved his papers out of the way.

“Shall I serve?” he offered.

“No, let me.”

Roy poured a glass for each of them, and they clinked their glasses together.

“It was a lovely wedding,” Zorace said. Then, he frowned and added, “Although I do wish the girl had stayed as queen.”

Roy chuckled. “You’re going to oppose this decision until the end, aren’t you?” Zorace had, after all, been the most persistent of those unwilling to let Fie give up her post. It had taken a combination of Roy’s wheedling and Fie’s begging to break him.

This, Zorace realized, was his first time ever sharing a drink with his nephew as family. The conversation paused as he slowly carried the glass to his lips.

Then, he whispered, “Why did you never ask me how I came to know the information about the duke?” He felt he could ignore the issue no longer. “Shouldn’t all traitors be punished so that our kingdom can have a better future?” Zorace had been prepared for the other shoe to drop since the moment he passed over the information; to turn the papers in was to implicitly confess his actions to the king.

However, Roy only took another sip and said, “I permitted it because you did it as my ally.” The words, *I knew what you intended* went unspoken between them. Come to think of it, Roy pondered, he had always been too conscious of his position as a king (that, and the wall of formality Zorace built in between them) to speak his mind this frankly.

Zorace met Roy’s admission with silence. Then, he switched tracks and said, “Frankly speaking, I regret my decision. I rather think we’ve let the finest young woman I’ve ever met slip through our fingers.”

Roy was momentarily taken aback, but as the meaning registered, he broke

out into a smile.

“You’re right,” he said. “I think you’re absolutely right. She’ll be a tough act to follow.” He gave his uncle a triumphant grin that had never shown anyone else before.

“Am I not always telling you? You must be kinder to women. If you don’t make it a habit, then you’re liable to wind up in situations like this.”

“Yes, my lord uncle. You are absolutely correct. If it hadn’t been for that, I would never have lost the opportunity to marry such an incredible, once in a lifetime woman, and I wouldn’t be drowning my sorrows in this.” He indicated his glass with a grin. “From now on, I will resolve to treat all women more kindly.”

“You’d do well to remember that promise,” Zorace advised.

Roy nodded. “And you’d best keep a close eye on me, uncle, for I am still your immature and inexperienced nephew. Please continue to lend me your guidance.”

Zorace smiled back—not as a subject smiles before his king, but as a man smiles to his own family.

“You leave me no choice,” he said. “Very well. These weary old bones shall have to keep going just a little longer.”

Chapter 34 — Epilogue

The voices of two girls could be heard from inside the Dorbel mansion.

“I’ll be back later!” called one.

“Do you have enough money?” said the other. “And swaddling clothes? What about a towel—?”

“I’m fine; I have everything. You’re a big old worrywart, Lynette.”

A third voice said, “I made you lunch to take on the road, madam.”

“Thanks, Biffe. I can’t wait to eat it!”

After finishing this exchange, the first girl opened the door and set out. Well, perhaps “girl” was no longer the appropriate term, as this young lady was now eighteen years old. However, in appearance alone, she hadn’t changed much in the past two years. She was no taller, and her baby face still made her look scarcely sixteen. The biggest change was...

“Isn’t the weather great today, Qurio? You and I are going to see your daddy very soon.”

...the six-month-old baby cradled in her arms.

“Madam,” called a servant, “your carriage is ready for you.”

The woman climbed into the carriage with the baby in her arms. “To Wienne, please,” she said.

“As you command, my lady.”

The carriage began to roll away from the mansion. Fie soothed the baby in her arms and asked, “Do you mind the rocking?”

“Ma!” the baby exclaimed.

Life was peaceful here in the capital city of Orstoll. Thanks to the fall of Duke Zerenade, organized crime was largely a thing of the past, and even when the

occasional ne'er-do-well popped up, the knights rounded them up in a trice.

The young woman descended from the carriage and looked up at the stores and houses lining the city streets. "This brings me back," she murmured. She thanked her driver and then set off the street, head swiveling to take in all the sights as she walked.

"That store is where your mommy used to shop," she told the baby. "I once bought a flaming hot candy for your daddy there, tricked him into eating it, and watched him jump about a meter into the air."

As she traipsed her merry way down memory lane, a man recognized her face and whispered to the woman next to him, "Is that the queen? Oh, well, she isn't the queen any more, but—you know what I mean."

"Oh, is that really her?"

The young woman overheard them and quickly pulled a hat over her head.

"Maybe I'm being too loud," she told the baby.

"Ma-ma."

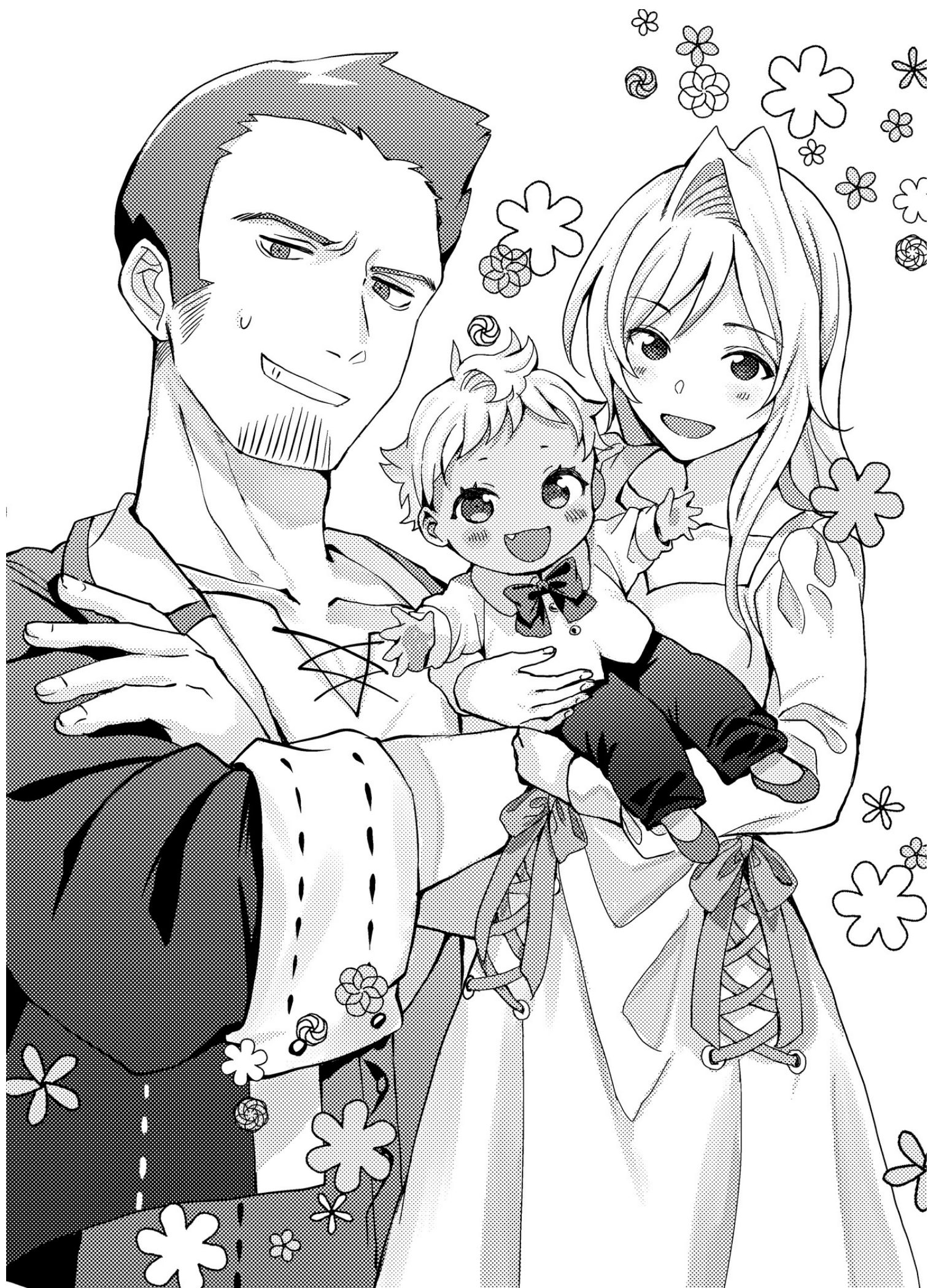
"Uh-huh. Let's get going to the castle."

She decided to cut her tour of the city short and set off for the castle instead.

Gormus was putting in extra practice with his sword outside of lesson time. He split the air with a particularly powerful swing, the wind vibrating audibly.

"Wow," said a woman's voice behind him. "You're just as strong as I remember. Are you still doing muscle training?"

"Hm?" he said. Her voice sounded almost familiar. He turned around, whereupon he received the shock of his life. There stood a young blonde woman in a white dress carrying a baby in her arms.



Even though she had grown her hair out, he immediately recognized who she was. It was Fie.

“Ugh!” he said. “What’re you doing here?”

“What kind of greeting is that?” she asked. “Here I am, stopping by to see an old friend I haven’t seen in a year, and this is the reception I get?”

Yes, he thought, they were indeed friends, but her situation was so...complex (maybe that was the right word for it) that he didn’t know how to approach her. Still, she didn’t seem to care, and she hugged the baby to her hip to show her off to Gormus.

“Look,” she said, “we had a baby. Her name’s Qurio. She’s a cute little thing, don’t you think?”

The smug look she gave him was identical to the ones she’d given him many times before.

A line of sweat ran down Gormus’s cheek. “Don’t try to show her off,” he said.

“No, it’s fine. She can already hold her own head up.” *That’s not the issue*, thought Gormus.

“Want to try holding her?” she asked.

“No, I’m good...” His strength made it too easy to accidentally hurt a baby. Likewise, his mind was a mess of confusion. All of a sudden, the news got out that she was the king’s second wife, and then she started playing the role of his first wife and queen. But then, before Gormus could see her again, she was marrying Queen. He attended their wedding, but he didn’t have a chance to talk with her before he went back to school and, eventually, he heard the news that she was pregnant. As a result, he hadn’t actually spoken to her in quite some time.

Yet even as confused as he was, Gormus was still thrilled to see her again. In honor of that, he decided not to tell her how obnoxious that smug grin of hers was, so he scratched his head instead and asked, “So, uh, how’ve you been?” In those words were his complex emotions and a reminder of the old days they once shared.

Fie picked up on all of that and smiled at him a little sadly. She knew that those days in which they could horse around together as fellow squires were long gone.

She hugged her baby tight and said, "Pretty good."

Then, a moment later, she perked back up and added, "Pregnancy was a real hassle, as I bet you can expect, and she's been a hassle even after she was born. What with the colic and all, you know? But Lynette's been a big help, and now look how cute she is. She's a good kid."

She smirked once more and tried to show him the baby again.

Another bead of sweat rolled down Gormus's cheek. "It's a good thing she doesn't take after you."

"Hey, what is that supposed to mean?"

The two made up for lost time, catching up as Fie held the baby in her arms.

"Since you're here today," Gormus asked, "does that mean you're attending the ceremony?"

"Yeah," Fie said. "Although I wish I could have been one of the graduates."

"Don't be ridiculous."

She giggled and then waved goodbye. "I'm going to show the baby to some of the others. See you around."

"Be careful with her," he warned her.

"It's fine," she said. "Look, watch this!"

Gormus wanted to ask what "this" was, but Fie was already skipping away.

"Look at the baby..."

"S-So little."

"Wow..."

The north dorm was mostly empty apart from Slad, Remie, and Gees who

stood transfixed before Fie, nervously staring at her child.

“Want to hold the baby?” she asked.

Remie lit up and cried, “Can I?”

“Yeah. Like this.” She showed him the proper way to hold Qurio and then handed him her daughter.

Remie took Qurio nervously, but for all his nerves, he held the baby well. “W-Wow...” he said. Qurio stared at him with round eyes, not knowing who this person holding her was.

“Adorable...” Remie said, blushing from the cuteness.

“I want to try too!” Slad cried.

“Go ahead,” said Fie, grinning as Slad took his turn.

“Don’t drop them now,” Gees warned.

“I-I’ll be fine,” said Slad. “I know how to hold a baby.” Despite how confidently he spoke, his arms trembled when Remie passed the baby over. However, Slad didn’t drop her.

“Ooh...” he breathed. He felt a small flame of warmth alight in his heart, and he stared down at the baby in his arms as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. Then he laughed. “He looks just like Queen.”

“She does,” Fie agreed. “Even though she’s a girl.” Well, either way, she was the spitting image of Queen, with her dark skin and white hair.

“But she’s got your eyes,” said Slad. She did. Her blue eyes must have come from Fie’s side of the family.

The three boys continued to stare at Qurio, spellbound, until Fie asked Gees, “Do you want to hold her too?”

He looked slightly concerned, but he nodded anyway. “Sure.”

Next, Fie went to the 18th’s guardroom wherein she found Conrad, Orbel, Parwick, and Garuge.

“Goodness,” said Conrad. “It has been far too long.”

Fie giggled self-consciously.

The others were surprised to see her visit with a baby in tow, but they all welcomed her warmly just the same. Conrad made her a cup of tea like it was old times, and Garuge, the former enabler of much of her mischief, said, “I can hardly believe this mischievous young rascal now has a child of her own. Oh, how time flies.” He sounded deeply moved.

“I’ve only been gone a year,” Fie pointed out.

“Even so.”

Sir Parwick, being his usual reticent self, said nothing but carefully set the tea down on the table in front of her.

Orbel wrote “What a cute baby” on his board.

Fie enjoyed catching up with her old friends for a while, but then she asked about the group’s missing members. “Where’s Sir Crow at?” she asked. She figured Sir Cain was busy with some sort of intelligence operation, so hadn’t expected to see him at least.

“I reckon he’s setting up for the ceremony,” Garuge said.

“Really?”

“Why don’t you go say hello to him? You’ll give him the shock of his life.”

Fie snickered. “Good,” she said. “I plan to.”

As Crow worked to set up the venue, he heard a woman’s voice from behind him calling his name. He jolted and spun around; there stood a girl who brought back a wave of memories.

“Heath?” he cried. “I mean, Fie?” Not only was it her, but she had a baby in her arms!

“Long time no see, Sir Crow,” she said. “Here, Qurio, let me introduce you to Sir Crow as well. This is your mommy’s old mentor.”

Qurio looked at Crow and said, “Ma!”

Flabbergasted, Crow asked, “Is that kid...yours?”

“She sure is. What, didn’t anyone tell you?”

Truthfully, no one had. He had spent most of this last year away from Wiene in order to take care of business for his family, although he knew about Fie’s wedding, of course. The speed at which time flew startled him. Wait, maybe it wasn’t time that was moving too fast—it hadn’t even been two years yet. Fie and Queen were the ones moving too fast!

Nevertheless, seeing Fie with a baby was a huge shock, especially, Crow thought, because Queen didn’t see the type to rush into something like that.

Guessing what it was that floored him, Fie sneered and said, “How about you, Sir Crow? Don’t tell me. Have you not found anyone to marry you yet?”

For the knighthood’s resident playboy, bringing up marriage was tantamount to an attack. For all his popularity, marriage was still not in the cards.

“No, but I mean, I’ll get around to it someday...” he mumbled.

“If you don’t get serious, you’re going to lose all the best years of your life. You can’t keep fooling around. Haven’t you thought of settling down? It’s shameful that I managed to get married before you.”

She grinned in triumph and kept shoving the baby at him, as if to rub it in his face.

Truth be told, Crow had largely stopped skirt chasing after Fie’s wedding, but his playboy reputation preceded him, leading to his utter lack of luck in finding a wife.

Fie flaunted the baby once more as a trophy of her victory.

He decided to play along and gave her a good-natured noogie. “You think you’re so good just because you’re married, huh, punk?”

“No!” she cried, shrieking with laughter. “Don’t hurt me!”

Curio stuck a finger in her mouth and watched the two of them argue.

As Fie entered the castle, she heard a thunder of running footsteps and a boy’s voice crying, “Is Fie here?” A black-haired boy who looked awfully like Roy

barreled through a door across the way.

“You shouldn’t run in the halls, Your Highness Prince Salsa,” Fie chided.

Salsa was Roy’s younger brother. Yes, that’s correct—Roy had a younger brother. Just before the old king passed away, he and a commoner in town had conceived a child together; however, the boy was born after the king’s death and as such, the government refused to recognize him as a legitimate heir. He was soon abducted by Duke Zerenade and hidden in a place where no one, not even Zorace, could find. Once the war ended and Duke Zerenade was defeated, Salsa was found, and Roy immediately sent him home to the palace for his own protection, wherein he had become well acquainted with Fie during her stint as the acting queen.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Your Highness,” she added.

“What’re you being so formal with me for?” he whined.

She giggled. “Good to see you, Salsa. Here, come meet Qurio.”

“Oh wow,” he said. “Is this the baby you just had?”

“I had her six months ago, but yes.”

Salsa resembled Roy in looks alone, his time being raised among commoners having bequeathed him with a more open and cheerful personality. Duke Zerenade had told him that the royal family abandoned him, planting a bitter resentment in Salsa. However, once that misunderstanding was cleared up, Salsa warmed to Roy immensely.

The door opened behind Salsa, and Zorace strode in. “Listen here, Salsa,” he chastised. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times. The royal family must always conduct themselves with a certain level of dignity.”

“Aw, quit getting on my case, you old geezer,” whined Salsa.

Even though Zorace had finally retired from his position of chancellor, he still oversaw Salsa’s education.

“It is a pleasure to have you with us once more, Your Grace,” he said, now addressing Fie.

“Good to see you too! You look like you’re doing well.”

He chuckled. “Yes, thanks to the fact that I’ve been freed from the worst of my labor.”

“You can be freed from me too,” Salsa offered.

“My last work will be to raise you into a fine, respectable prince.”

“Bah!”

Fie grinned as she watched Salsa and Zorace squabble, until she saw another familiar face come up from behind them and ran to meet him.

“It’s good to see you again, Your Majesty,” she said.

“Thank you for coming.”

Roy hadn’t changed a bit, which didn’t surprise her—it had been less than three years since they last met. But in those three years, so much had changed for Fie. The new baby was just the tip of the iceberg.

“I hear Fielle is doing well for herself too,” he said.

“Yes, we keep in touch with monthly letters.”

Once Tomas regained consciousness, he married Fielle and succeeded to the throne of Vorland. Additionally, Fielle had worked some magic (Fie had no idea about the details) that forced her parents to abdicate the throne and combine Daeman with Vorland into one larger country. Fie dearly wanted to ask about what had gone down, but Fielle seemed to be having so much fun with her pottery that Fie never got around to broaching the subject.

“She and Tomas seem to be very happy together,” Fie said.

“That’s good to hear.” Roy broke out into a grin to match Fie’s, but the conversation was beginning to go in an awkward direction for him.

“By the way,” Fie asked, “have you found a good candidate to marry yet?”

Roy smiled stiffly. “No, but, uh, I’m working on it. But you know, it’s hard to make time, what with my duties and all...”

Unlike before, Roy now accepted his subject’s suggestions about possible marriage candidates, and rumors popped up here and there that he had spoken with this countess or that duchess about arranging a match. However, Fie still

hadn't heard a thing about him falling in love with any of these potential suitors.

"Well, when you do find someone, you make sure to be nice to them, okay? You can't be thinking only of yourself. You both have to be on the same page first, and then you can take the lead."

"I-I'm working on it... Ah, that reminds me, I have more work to do..." Roy tried to make his escape, but Fie would not let up. "Sorry to cut this short, but take care, all right?"

She sighed as she watched him slink away. "Captain Yore and Sir Crow are never going to get married at this rate." She couldn't help but worry for them—here she was, years younger than them, and already two steps ahead on the path of life.

Zorace, watching the exchange, smiled. "His Majesty has changed considerably as well, you know. It used to be that he wouldn't give a woman the time of day if she tried talking to him about something he didn't care for. Now, he gives her a full book of topics he actually is interested in and makes her read it before they converse."

"I mean...I guess that's an improvement," she said. He still really wasn't getting the point, but hey, Fie thought with a wry grin, it was a start.

What had brought Fie to Wienne today was the squires' accolade, the ceremony in which the squires graduated to knights. Although she could not participate as one of the graduates, she intended to be there as Queen's wife and as chaperone for their daughter.

"It's about to start," she told Qurio. "We'd better hurry."

Just as she set off for the stage where the ceremony would take place, a man called out to her, "Hey, is that you?"

She stopped. She didn't recognize this man, but he clearly knew her.

"I knew it," he said. He grinned when she tilted her head in confusion. "Guess you don't remember me, huh? I was the judge on the day you tried out for the squires."

“That was you?” she cried. What a shock to meet that person here, of all places! As frustrated as she had felt at the time, the loss of that match was now a pleasant memory.

The man looked Fie up and down, his face alive with memories, and smiled kindly at the baby. “And now you even have a kid of your own. How time flies.”

“Yeah,” she said. “A whole lot has happened since then—some of it good, some of it bad—but it felt like it all flew by in an instant.” She had never so much as spoken to him before, but all the same, Fie felt like this man was instrumental to her fate. Maybe meeting him here was fate too.

His smile clouded as he looked at her. “To tell you the truth,” he confessed, “I was actually one of the duke’s men. My wife and daughter were deathly ill, so I became an informant for the money.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. Even if the man was a traitor, she didn’t harbor any ill will towards him. What was the point? Fielle and Tomas were now happily married regardless of his actions. “Are your wife and daughter all right?” she asked.

The man grinned. “You bet. The king recommended us to a good doctor, and they’re both making a great recovery. I was ready to serve my time for my crimes as well, but the king granted me a pardon.”

“That’s great to hear.” And it *was* great, she thought as she beamed at him. She really meant it. “Take good care of them both, okay?”

“You take care of your family too,” he said. “Although I’m sure you don’t need me telling you that.”

“Of course not,” Fie said. “Family is important.”

The man smiled apologetically. “Sorry for taking up your time. You must be on your way to see the accolade ceremony, right? You’re going the wrong way, though. It’s over there.”

“Oh, oops,” she said. Looks like she’d made the wrong turn somewhere along the way. “Thanks.”

“Take care,” he said, “and see you around someday!”

“You take care too! Come on, Qurio, let’s go see daddy look handsome at his ceremony.”

She waved to the man and set off for the venue where her husband was waiting for her.

The purpose of this ceremony was to honor all of their hard work and training when they swore their swords to king and country, and commemorate their ascension to knighthood. The squires stood in a row before a sea of audience members, one of whom was, of course, Fie.

“It’s the queen,” someone whispered. “The queen is here.”

It was over a year since she had stopped being the queen, but the name still stuck. This was partially due to the fact that Roy still had not remarried and partially because Fie had caused such a splash by rising from public enemy number one to queen overnight. She’d done quite a good job of it too, in fact, so much that some people were still her fans.

Fie ignored their whispering and took a seat next to the former chancellor. “Fancy seeing you here,” she said.

“My schedule has opened up now that I’ve stepped down from my former role,” he explained. “And I am rather familiar, you might say, with many of these boys.”

Fie snickered. “We all used to say we were scared of you.”

Ever one to be strict, even after retiring, Zorace still periodically dropped by the dorms to check on the squires, to the point where they began to call him The Lecturer.

“I simply dispense good advice when I feel there is too much horseplay going on,” he insisted.

His air of nonchalance made Fie giggle even more.

“Oh, there’s the captain!” she cried. “It must be starting soon!”

Roy appeared in his king persona before the squires who respectfully sunk to their knees as one. Fie, who knew full well that the squires normally elevated

half-assing to an art form, gaped at the level of coordination they displayed. Then, once her surprise faded away, she smiled.

The chancellor looked at her and frowned. “Do you resent me?” he whispered.

She tilted her head in confusion. “What for?”

“For what I did. Had I left you alone, it would have been you standing on that stage.” His words rang with something almost like remorse. As he grew older, he began to wonder more and more whether he should have left certain things alone, not meddled in so many affairs.

Fie did not answer him for a few moments. Then, a nervous line of sweat trickling down her cheek, she said, “Honestly? A little bit, yeah.”

As apologetic as she was, the words still hit Zorace like a brick. “A-A bit,” he said. “I see.” He hadn’t expected her to be completely grudge-free, but—no, damn it, it was time to be honest with himself. He thought that, knowing her, she would shrug it off and tell him not to worry about it.

“It was fun being a squire, sure. And sometimes I still think about what it would have been like if I had been able to become a knight. However”—and here Fie gave Qurio a squeeze—“after she was born, I started realizing that maybe the path I chose to walk down isn’t so bad after all. Yeah. It’s pretty great.” She nodded, looking down at the baby sleeping in her arms.

“And besides,” she added, “I do feel sad when I look back on it. But I’m also very happy that someone found me.”

Zorace wasn’t sure how to respond to this and so stayed silent. Still somewhat rattled from the knowledge that she was a little angry at him, he realized that years ago, he wouldn’t have cared. Perhaps he was growing soft in his old age. And perhaps, he thought, this softness was the very thing that brought people together.

As if it had just occurred to her, Fie asked, “By the way, how did you know it was me back then?” At first, she had assumed he had recognized her from a portrait, but once Fie looked into it later, she realized that no portrait of hers had ever made it to Orstoll. Frankly, she didn’t even remember sitting one for

one. She found signs that someone back home had made a sketch of her and sent it to Orstoll, but the sketch didn't look anything like Fie. This had puzzled her, but it went on the back burner as she became busy with the queen job, the wedding, and her pregnancy. Eventually, she forgot all about it.

The chancellor looked far off into the distance and reminisced, "There was an agreement, long ago, between *him* and..."

"Who's him? Him and who?" Fie asked. "What are you talking about?" Unable to make heads or tails of this, her expression was a veritable sea of question marks.

But Zorace only smiled and refused to say more. Fie pouted and protested, but he remained unmoved. Finally, she gave up. *Well, if I wasn't mad at him before, she thought, I sure am now!* But come to think of it, she remembered someone else asking her a similar question just a few minutes before.

Prior to the ceremony, the squires huddled in a waiting room.

"It's almost time for the ceremony," said one. "Boy, am I nervous."

"You're telling me. What if I screw up?" another said.

Suddenly, a cheery voice called, "Hey, guys!"

"Ugh." One of the squires groaned. "It's Heath."

"No, it's Her Majesty Queen Fie."

"No, no, she used to be the queen. Now she's Her Majesty Ex-Queen Fie. Wait. Her Ex-Majesty Queen Fie? Her Majesty Queen Ex-Fie!"

Try as the squires might to capitalize on their connections to the royal family, their execution was a bit lacking.

"I came to see how's everyone doing," the intruder in their midst explained. "Also, I wanted to let Queen see the baby."

"If you're looking for Queen," said a squire. "I think he'll be back any minu—"

"Fie?!" Queen gasped. He had grown slightly over the past year, heightwise at least, but he otherwise hadn't changed a bit.

When Fie saw him, she ran up to him, their daughter in her arms. “Look, Qurio,” she said. “It’s daddy.” She passed the child to Queen with a “here you are.” He accepted the baby awkwardly, but lifted her up like she was the most precious thing alive.

Qurio gurgled, looking back at him with adorable, round eyes. “Oh, she’s happy,” said Fie. “I think that’s her being happy, at any rate.” She wasn’t pitching a fit, so she didn’t seem to mind being held, at least.

“Sorry,” Queen said. “I meant to see you earlier, but I got caught up.” As a prospective knight, Queen had little time to see Fie; she, too, was likewise preoccupied with her work in running their estate. This made him nervous to even hold his own daughter, and so he had asked Fie to come bring her to him. Once he became a knight, he promised, he would be able to be stationed somewhere closer to his family and spend much more time with them.

Fie giggled. “What’re you apologizing for?” She wasn’t remotely concerned about the same issue that preoccupied Queen, so she genuinely seemed not to know.

“Hey, get a room, you two,” one of the squires called.

“Yeah,” echoed another. “It’s not fair to the rest of us to have to watch you lovebirds.”

The metaphorical light of victory coming off of their two friends was too blinding. How dare they date, marry, and have kids while the rest of the squires made zero progress in their love lives?

Fie blinked as the other squires filed away, leaving the little family alone in the room. “Oh, whoops, everyone left while we were talking,” she said. Then she perked right back up and turned back to Queen. “It’s almost time for the ceremony. Good thing we made it in time, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Even though it was supposed to be a happy day, Queen looked somewhat unsettled. “Are you nervous?” Fie asked.

“No,” he said. “Well, yes, I am. But that’s not what’s bothering me...” There were far more than just butterflies weighing down Queen’s stomach. He looked

at Fie and asked, “Fie, do you regret choosing me?”

He faltered momentarily and then continued. “Back then, I wanted to be with you so badly, but I was only thinking of myself. I realize now that I never once thought about what you felt. I wonder sometimes if this is what you really want.” He paused again before saying, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you hate me.”

For a moment, Fie looked taken aback. Then she turned exasperated and said, “It’s a bit late to ask, don’t you think? Now we’re married and have a kid.”

He turned pale and gulped.

“Still,” she added, “I’m glad you asked.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been wanting to tell you something for a while, but I’ve never found the right time to say it.”

Queen wondered what it could be. Did she hate him? Was she unhappy in their marriage? Queen hadn’t been around much after the wedding—okay, scratch that, he hadn’t been around most of the time.

“You know, Queen,” she began.

Queen waited with bated breath for her next words.

Then she grinned, looked up at him, and said, “I love you more than anyone else in the whole wide world.”



The ceremony began with each of the dorms sending up a representative to kneel before Roy and offer their sword to him. The north dorm boys chose Gormus for his hard work. Though Queen surpassed Gormus in swordsmanship, Gormus's leadership and commanding skills were top notch. Fie approved of this choice immensely. Gormus took to his knees before Roy and passed him his sword, whereupon Roy placed the sword on his shoulder, and Gormus swore his oath before the king.

The ceremony went smoothly, and the day proceeded into its final event: a tournament held before the king. This was no team competition but rather a match between two brilliant representatives of the new knights, Queen and Persil. Oddly enough, this turned out to be the same matchup as was in the East—North Interdormitory Duel.

It was a marvelous battle. Queen moved with all the speed of lightning, and Persil met his every blow with deadly accuracy, enthralling the spectators. Unlike the previous match, where Fie's cheering helped him pull off a win despite Persil initially gaining the upper hand, Queen won this match outright with his superior skill.

Qurio was awake again, and she stared at the battle intently (although whether she was watching per se, was debatable). "Your daddy's incredible, isn't he?" Fie asked her.

Then, just as the ceremony showed signs of winding down to an end, a howl of "I refuse to accept it!" rose from the ranks of graduating knights. There stood Luka, yelling, "Do they really mean to let such a fine occasion as this pass without the opportunity to display my magnificent swordsmanship? It is preposterous, I tell you!"

"What's done is done." Kerio sighed. "You weren't chosen to be the representative because I beat you in the qualifying matches. And then Persil beat me."

"Well, how come we had only two representatives?" Luka shot back. "I should think the spectators would find my illustrious swordplay most enriching!"

The north dorm squires—knights now, rather—all shouted as one, “Give it a rest, Luka!”

One of the east dorm knights sighed. “Oh well. Come on, let’s get him out of here.” The two groups of young men looked at one another, nodded, and stood up to remove Luka from the scene. However, Luka protested mightily.

“Come on, Luka, work with us.” Someone grunted.

“Let go of me, you mongrels!” he howled.

“Hey, come on now—ow!”

“He kicked me, that little—!”

And in no time at all, a fight broke out, ending the stately ceremony with an all-out brawl. Heslow paled at the scandal of it, but Roy only sighed, slipped on his mask, and went to find Crow.

“Wow,” Crow said. “I haven’t seen you wear that thing in ages. What’s wrong?”

“I would have thought it was obvious.”

Crow grinned.

The chancellor sighed as well as he watched the knights destroy the ceremony he had worked so hard to make beautiful. Then he looked over to his neighbor and saw a grin spreading across her face. Oh no. He had a bad feeling about this.

“Will you hold her for a second?” she asked, and she carefully deposited the baby in his lap. Then she sprang from her seat and dashed off to the brawl.

The few knights standing off to the side blanched.

“Oh no! It’s her!” one of the knights yelled.

“Oh great, that’s the last thing we need.” Another one groaned.

“Whoo!” Fie cried. “Let me join in!”

“Hey, Queen! Get your wife out of here!” a knight bawled.

“Wait, Fie!” Queen yelped. “Stop!”

Undaunted, she cried, “Duel time! Duel time!”

She grabbed a wooden sword with a practiced hand and leaped into the fray. Those happy days weren't over after all.

Side Story — Tracking Down the Mystery Man

One morning in the mess hall, one of the squires ran up to Fie's table and shrieked, "I saw him! I swear I did!"

Fie and her friends, indifferent to the outburst, continued to spoon up potato soup. "But did you really?" she asked. "Are you sure you aren't seeing things?"

The shouting boy glared at their lack of reaction. "I thought you of all people would believe me!" he snapped. "You're all a bunch of idiots!"

Fie put down her spoon and looked at him. "Hey now, that's rude. I'll have you know I got the third highest score in the whole class on the final exams. Anyway, he's just an urban legend, isn't it? That means he's not real."

"That's where you're wrong," the boy insisted. "I swear I saw him."

Queen, sitting next to Fie, was so single-mindedly focused on his food that he had missed the earlier conversation. "Who are you talking about?" he asked. He tilted his head doggishly.

Fie shrugged. "Bruce M'chouchouteman," she said. "He's just an urban legend. Don't pay any attention to it."

The boy howled again. "I'm telling you, I saw him!"

Bruce M'chouchouteman was a figure of legend in Wienne. The stories claimed he roamed the city streets at night searching for unsuspecting pedestrians to blow a blast of a mysterious liquid on. His victims ranged from criminals to innocent school girls. No one knew if he was a force of good or a force of evil. He was the mystery man, the staple of countless stories in the popular boy's magazine, *Nu: Believe it or Not!* He was...Bruce M'chouchouteman.

After breakfast, the boys went into the recreation room, where Fie tried to explain the phenomenon to Queen with the help of a magazine she borrowed

from Slad.

Queen listened blankly and then said, “Now that you mention it, this does ring a bell.”

Well, of course it did. Bruce M’chouchouteman was a constant subject of conversation for the boys, and Fie wondered how in the world Queen had managed to avoid hearing talk of him thus far.

Queen’s face wasn’t very expressive, and he looked quite well put together at first glance, but she knew all too well that half the time he was off in his own little world. What made him space out like that? She took this opportunity to scrutinize him. He stared back at her blankly for a few moments before his cheeks turned a brilliant, bashful crimson.

Remie noticed Queen sweating bullets and rushed to step in. “I mean, Queen prefers stories about knights, right? I don’t think he’s a big fan of urban legends, and if he isn’t interested, then it makes sense that he’d forget that he ever heard of one.”

Pacified, Fie nodded. “You make a good point.”

Slad exclaimed, “So what’s next? Are we gonna go look for him too?”

The trilogy of lackluster responses went as follows:

I Bet His Eyes were Only Playing Tricks on Him by Fie.

We Have Homework... by Gees.

Talk About a Waste of Time by Gormus.

Queen looked around at the others and added, “If Heath’s not going, then I’m not going.”

Left in the minority, Slad whimpered, his shoulders slumping. Remie tried to comfort him by saying, “It’s okay. I’ll help you with your homework.”

“I don’t *want* to do my homework!”

That cleared up the mystery, Fie thought. It was only another procrastination technique of Slad’s. The Bruce M’chouchouteman rumors would die down any day now.

And yet...

Two boys burst into the mess hall at breakfast time, and one wailed, "I saw him too!"

"It's true!" yelled his companion. "You have to believe us!"

Naturally, neither boy was the same one from yesterday, but yesterday's boy stood up and cried, "See? I told you he's real!"

Suspicious, another squire asked them, "Hey, are you guys trying to pull our legs? That's an infringement of the Squires' Rules and Prohibitions, Squirely Made, Squirely Upheld, and For Our Own Squirely Good, Article 38: 'Lame pranks are prohibited' and Article 4: 'Getting our hopes with promises of adventure is prohibited.'"

"Since we happen to be on the subject," Fie put in with a grin, "Article 4 was made 'cause of me."

"Quit bragging," said Gormus.

The north dorm was nothing but a collection of problem children, but in an effort to dissuade themselves from inconveniencing each other, the boys had created a series of articles to govern themselves. (Incidentally, the impetus of this was Fie's behavior.)

The first boy swore. "Why doesn't anyone believe me?"

"Are you still going on about this?" one of the other squires said. "C'mon, boys, let's get him out of here."

"On it!" said his friends.

Two of the squires grabbed the Bruce believer by the arms and held him tight.

"Stop trying to trick us," one of the restrainers said. "Sure, we all had a lot of fun wondering if the legends were true back when we were all still wet behind the ears. But we've been squires for ten months now. That means we're practically adults. We all know that urban legends aren't true; sure, they're fun in their own way, but it's time we showed some maturity. That's why you shouldn't try to trick us! It's the sand punishment for you now."

“No! That’s not fair!” the boy pleaded.

The sand punishment was quite a grave punishment indeed. It entailed being tied up with ropes and left to lie out on the training grounds, and if anyone complained that the punishment wasn’t fair, they’d be dragged through the sandy dirt. Autumn was the best time of year for great gusts of wind to whip the sand up in everyone’s face, so the punished and punisher alike were liable to get a healthy dusting.

Fie watched them go, puzzled. “I don’t get why he’d stick to his guns to the point where he’d get covered in sand,” she said. It was clear to her that anyone being so persistent about this would receive at least *some* form of punishment—as she was well aware, having just caused trouble of her own.

“Who knows?” Gormus said with a shrug.

Up until now, Fie and the others thought this whole thing was only a joke or some kind of misunderstanding. But were those claims of seeing Bruce M’chouchouteman actually sincere?

The squires thought the punishment would make the rumors finally die down, but over the next few days, reported sightings kept cropping up one after the other. After a full month, more than half the dorm had suffered the sand punishment, which began to present a problem for those involved with carrying out said punishment.

“At this rate, we’re doomed” The leader of the punishers moaned to Fie and her friends. He had invited them to his office (by which he meant a lunch table in the mess hall). “There’s bound to be a revolution any day now.”

“Sounds to me like an abuse of power,” Fie pointed out.

“Hush!” he said. “You’re just as guilty as they are because you never stop their deranged raving! If this keeps up, we here in the SMSWDBIUL (Somewhat Mature Squires Who Don’t Believe In Urban Legends) faction know that our day of defeat is close at hand!”

For some unknown reason, a group of boys sat on the floor in one corner of the mess hall as they ate their lunches. Flags hung above them which read,

“Down with the abuse of authority!” and “How dare you be a nonbeliever!” They were, Fie realized, going on a chair strike.

Seeing this, the squires neutral to either side made a show of proclaiming their pity in lofty tones.

“Oh,” cried one, “what poor souls!”

“This,” said another, “is true oppression! You have our support, brave heroes.”

The boy, who had summoned Fie’s gang for help, looked at them and trembled. “They’ve been doing nothing but criticizing me since day one!” he complained. Oh, the selfish masses, only thinking of themselves! “We’re doomed.” He moaned. “The situation is truly dire.” *Oh, so dire!*

Yet while the boy thought Fie and the others empathized with his terrible plight, Fie had her own reasons for coming over to “help”—namely, that she was interested in making a business proposition. The boy was clearly in deep distress, and if there was one rule of thumb Fie had learned from all her time as a squire, it was that being in trouble made for good opportunities.

“If you end up dying in the revolution, I’ll make your tombstone for you,” she offered. “If you’d like a wooden tombstone, I’ll give it to you for the reasonable price of twenty percent off. But if you insist on having a stone one, it’ll require a lot more labor on my part. Ooh, this is cutting my own throat, but I’ll give it to you for three percent off!”

Capitalizing on her natural dexterity, Fie had taken up construction work for the boys in order to counteract the drain on her funds that her snacking habits caused. She had the basics of woodworking down and, when it was needed, could manage stonework as well. She also ran a pretty brisk business doing portraits, thanks to her skills in drawing mugshots of criminals. For this enterprise, Garuge lent her both the workshop and appropriate tools.

“I don’t want that!” the boy cried. “Besides, that’s a rip-off! Is that what you call a discount?”

“Then what’d you call me over here for?” She pouted at his rejection of her kindness (and the lost business opportunity).

“Not for a tombstone maker, that’s for sure!”

“Then for what?” the tombstone maker wanted to know.

“You guys are my friends, right?”

“Hmm.” Not exactly, Fie thought, but the boy certainly seemed to think so.

Incidentally, Fie had already been approached by the anti-SMSWBIUL faction with a nonaggression pact which read, “Please, everyone (and by everyone, we’re mainly referring to you, Heath)—don’t get involved in this, and we won’t bother you,” and responded to it with, “Sure, why not?” That meant that when the revolution came, he alone would be denounced—but was there any need to tell him that? Not exactly. So she didn’t.

“I want you to do something for me,” the boy said. “I want you to find out the truth for me. There’s no Bruce M’chouchouteman, and even if there was, purely for argument’s sake, then it must be someone or something else being mistaken for Bruce M’chouchouteman. I want you to find them and figure out who they really are.”

“Hmm,” Fie said. There was no harm, she felt, in letting things run their course, but she was admittedly curious as to why the rumors hadn’t died out yet.

“If you help me, I’ll give you ten coupons for a free meal at Bello Bello, that pasta restaurant with the big servings downtown.”

“Anything to help a friend!”

In the light of his passionate feelings of friendship and camaraderie, who was Fie to say no?

Remie, silent up until now, suddenly broke in with, “Wait, hold on. If we want to find him, that means we need to be able to go into town after nightfall.” He felt sympathy for the boy’s imminent execution, but after watching his conversation with Heath (Fie) take this wild turn, he felt the need to speak up and put a stop to it.

Leaving the castle at night was not expressly forbidden; however, the guards at the gate turned the squires away every time they tried, which made

nighttime excursions off-limits in a practical sense. They might have been able to leave if they had an older knight with them, but there were no other ways to slip past the watchful eyes of the guards. The issue with that idea, though, was that Heslow would blow a gasket if he found out.

However, Fie had already anticipated this level of opposition and slipped the coupons into her pocket. She said, “You would desert your friend in his time of need, Remie? We can’t abandon him! We’re his only hope!”

The boy she had tried to sell a tombstone to put on a showy display of pitifulness. “It’s true,” he cried. “Please, help me!”

Remie groaned. As the most sympathetic of the group, this strategy worked wonders on him. He slumped forward and sighed. “Fine, if you insist.”

And with that, there were no more dissenting opinions. Fie and her friends were going to sneak into town at night.

A week later, the gang convened in the palace garden to begin their hunt for Bruce M’chouchouteman.

“Wait, why am I here too?” Gormus complained, arms folded across his chest. He had been absent during the previous incident as he was off doing work for the knights.

“Don’t you start fussing about it now,” Fie told him. “When it comes time to make your gravestone too, I’ll give you a nice four-percent-off discount.”

“I don’t want it.”

Fie pouted at yet another failed sales pitch. “Anyway,” she added, “aren’t you interested too after all these Bruce M’chouchouteman sightings?”

“I guess,” he admitted. At first, he had thought it was the usual silly nonsense combined with a prank that was typical of the squires. Yet now there were too many people claiming to have seen him for that to be true. Sure, it was possible that this was all some huge gag everyone had secretly agreed to be a part of, in the squires’ typical frivolous manner, but there was no way all of the boys could have kept their lips zipped about such a big secret for so long. Besides, no one

was capable of coming up with such a convoluted idea save for the wannabe tombstone maker standing in their midst. Even Gormus had to agree—there was some funny business going on here.

“And with that,” Fie said, “let’s get this expedition on the road!” Said expedition’s lineup consisted of Fie, bursting with excitement; Queen, just along for the ride; Gormus, roped into this only moments before; Remie, rather nervous; Slad, having the time of his life; and Gees, as calm as ever.

“You can say that all you want, but how are we supposed to get outside?” Gees asked. As mentioned previously, the boys were de facto banned from heading out into town at night. Serving as watchmen would have given them the opportunity to slip away, but the senior knights there with them would never allow that tomfoolery. This was where the king lived, after all. Security might have been relatively lax—King Roy once claimed he’d simply take care of any assassin himself—but that was still no excuse for shirking duty.

Fie chuckled. “Just watch,” she said. “The exterior defenses may be strong, but it’s time for an insider’s touch.”

But after a few minutes of standing around, she crossed her arms and muttered, “But is that true? This may not actually work...” From where she stood, she could see all the way to the farthest back gate where a pair of soldiers were standing watch. They looked serious, and even for someone with an “insider’s touch,” it would have been impossible to hoodwink them.

Worried, Remie turned to frown at Fie when—

“Hey, lad!” a grizzled old knight shouted. He stomped up to the squires and revealed himself to be Garuge. The others knew of him even outside of him being a member of Fie’s platoon. While he may not have fought often in battle, his chief role was to make and maintain the knights’ equipment. He was the most renowned smith in the whole kingdom, and the older knights told the boys that wielding a sword from Garuge was a mark of one’s true skill as a knight. Naturally, Gormus and all the other squires idolized him.

Garuge lumbered over to the “lad” and presented her with a sheet of paper. Fie leaped for joy. “Is this it, Garuge?!” she cried.

“Yup, see for yourself,” Garuge boasted. “Couldn’t be better.”

“Yay! That’s wonderful! Now we’ll be able to sneak out for sure!”

Slad’s eyes grew wide, and he asked, “Ooh, what is that?”

“Trouble,” Gormus said, crossing his arms, “and no mistake.” The others likewise looked concerned.

Fie and Garuge turned to the search party with triumphant grins and presented the paper to them. “Ta-da!” Fie cried. “A fake permission slip to leave the palace grounds!”

Garuge cackled. “Doesn’t look one bit different from a real one either. And you’d best believe it took quite a bit of work to make this. First I had to make the paper, and then I had to use the same ink and forge the right handwriting. I put my whole heart and soul into this masterpiece. Now you boys are free to go wherever you please!”

“A fake permission slip...” Slad mumbled.

“Is it really a forgery if it comes from one of the knights...?” Gees wondered.

Apparently that “insider’s touch” applied less to the castle and more to the knighthood itself.

Garuge’s permission slip in hand, Fie marched off to the gates and presented it to the guards on watch.

The guards took it and scrutinized it. One of them asked, “You sure you boys are good to go out on your own?” As the boys had feared, a couple of teenagers running around at night unchaperoned was bound to raise a few red flags.

“Uh-huh,” Fie said. “Sir Crow asked us to do him a favor, and we have to get it done tonight.” Her eyes betrayed not a hint of guile, as if every word out of her mouth was not, in fact, a fat pack of lies. Actually, earlier that evening, Fie had caught Sir Crow in the middle of sneaking off to philander, so she didn’t feel a drop of guilt for making up lies about him.

“I-I see,” said the watchman, daunted by her apparent sincerity. “Well, be careful, then.” He let the squires through and watched them head out.

They were out! “Yay!” Fie whisper-cheered.

“Are you sure this is okay?” Queen mumbled.

“It’s too late to go back now,” Gormus muttered.

Whispering all the while, the squires headed into town.

“How about we head to the part of town where everyone’s been spotting Bruce M’chouchouteman?” Fie suggested. She had been collecting the squires’ eyewitness accounts for the past week and discovered that most of these sightings had occurred in the southwestern corner of the city, a place that she and her friends had never even been on watch duty. This sector of the city was in the midst of rapid expansion as local merchants, having grown rich on the economic boom of King Roy’s reign, used their profits to build new houses there in great numbers. An increase in population should have led to a proportional increase in crime, but crime was largely unheard of in this affluent neighborhood.

Fie and her friends set off for said neighborhood as the stars twinkled in the night sky overhead. On a normal night, Fie’s gang was likely to be asleep at this hour, but the city was still awake with bright lamp light and adults promenading about merrily. Several of these adults frowned when they saw the squires, mistaking them for ordinary children, before recognizing their uniforms and carrying on their merry way.

The corners of Slad’s mouth quirked up into a grin as he stepped into a pool of shadow between the lamplights. “Something about walking around alone at night is pretty exciting, don’t you think?” he said. Sure, the squires had conducted night patrols before, but always with a senior knight around. Roaming the city at night on their own was a different sort of beast altogether.

“D-Don’t say that,” Remie said, as he, too, began to grin. “Remember, we’re here on business.”

Fie noticed a swanky, high-class bar and pasted herself to the window, marveling over all the delicious-looking food and drinks she still had had no opportunity to taste. “Hey, Queen,” she called, “see that blue drink in there? D’you think it’s alcohol? I wonder if it tastes good.”

“How am I supposed to know?” he answered.

Gormus unpeeled her from the window and said, “Hey, we’ll get in trouble if one of the knights catches us here. Let’s get moving.”

Thanks to Gormus, the siren song of the night failed to ensnare the squires, who straightened up and continued on their way. They had a few close calls with nearly running into watchmen on their way through the city, but Fie’s skill in espionage allowed her to spot the guards before they spotted her, and she shepherded her friends into alleys to wait in hiding until the coast was clear. During these moments, Fie pressed herself close against Queen, which did dangerous things to his heart rate—but at any rate, they all arrived at their destination in one piece.

A chill crept up the squires’ spines as they set foot in the neighborhood. Save for a few solitary gas lamps preventing total darkness, this area was a far cry from the bright and boisterous streets further downtown. In fact, it felt as deserted and silent as the grave, yet (and this should have been oxymoronic, but there was no more fitting way to describe it) Fie noticed several people huddled together watching them.

Fie took a better look at her watchers, and her mouth dropped open in shock. They were all teenagers and children! Some looked around her age, but others were a few years older or younger. Most were playing in groups. Downtown, every passerby had been an adult, but here only the children roamed around.

A scowling teenage boy approached Fie’s gang as they stood there, slack-jawed, and said, “Hey, what do you think you’re doing? You’re not from around here.” A group of boys slouched around behind him; Fie guessed he was the leader of this little posse. Although he jammed his hands in his pockets and glared at her like a would-be hooligan, she noticed his clothes were well tailored, his crudely applied accessories high quality.

He continued to glare at them until he registered their uniforms, whereupon he spluttered, “Gah! You’re squires?”

“What’re you guys doing out here so late at night?” Fie asked. She thought it was a simple question, but the boys looked hesitant, unsure of whether or not to run. Finally, they decided that running from someone as small as Fie would be an insult to their pride and chose to stand their ground.

“We’re chilling,” he said.

“Huh?”

“At home, it’s always go practice this, go study that. Night’s the only time we can get to sneak out and have a little fun for ourselves. You got a problem with that?”

It certainly made sense. It wasn’t hard to imagine feeling trapped by being born into such a constrained, if comfortable, life as this.

Still, Fie was taken aback. “It’s dangerous to be out here at night!”

“Mind your own beeswax,” the kid told her. “Sides, it’s not like any of you have room to talk. Aren’t you all sneaking off from guard duty or something?”

He did make a good point, Fie conceded. Well, so much for warning him. She sighed and decided to cut the conversation short. “Have it your way,” she said. “Just be careful.”

She waved and turned to walk away, unwilling to pursue this any further. The boy gloated, the other boys looking on in admiration and then mobbing him, cheering, as if he was a great hero to have bested Fie in this battle of words. Made sense, Fie thought. Kids would be kids.

Slad, as much a kid as the rest of them, asked, “Heath, are you really gonna just let them win?”

She gave him a withering look that immediately dampened his excitement. “They’re not in any danger,” she pointed out, “so what’s the point?” Of all the places to skulk around all night, this was a safe area for it. So who cared?

As Fie and her friends walked through the neighborhood, they found similar groups of teens lurking on every street corner, all the merchant children having taken up the delinquency fad. Teenagers glared at them as they passed, as if Fie and her crew were interlopers on their turf. However, when the teens saw the squire uniforms and realized these were apprentices of the very same knights they were mindful to avoid, they slunk off to hide themselves or watch from a distance.

“It’s amazing they haven’t been robbed considering how much money and valuables they have on them,” Fie pointed out. From a security standpoint, these teens were walking targets.

“The poorer parts of town are too far away,” Gees pointed out. “I think that’s the reason the merchants chose to live here in the first place.”

While government assistance was gradually lifting the lower-class neighborhoods out of poverty, the fact remained that many people were still unable to shake off crime as a way to make a living. In those places, it was much more dangerous to walk around at night.

“There’s kids everywhere,” Slad commented. “If Bruce M’chouchouteman showed up on a night like this, pretty soon the whole city would know of him.”

“But we can’t let the adults know about this,” Fie said. “The squires are already divided enough over this as it is.” Among the squires, she was particularly distrustful of adults and how they handled sticky situations.

Suddenly, a grown man’s voice cut their conversation short. “What are you doing out here so late at night?”

Fie jolted. They were being careful to keep a close eye out for both Bruce M’chouchouteman and any roaming watchmen (in fact, they had just dodged a group of knights on patrol a few minutes ago), but they had somehow failed to notice someone creeping up behind them. Fie whirled around and saw a man standing there in the light armor of a soldier. Where the knights typically handled patrols and major cases such as rounding up gangs of criminals, many soldiers were likewise stationed about town to handle misdemeanors and other minor incidents.

“Oh crap, it’s Marth!” cried one of the nearby teenagers. “Run!” The teens scattered.

Marth heaved a sigh as he watched them flee, before turning to Fie and the others. He looked a very serious sort of man, with not a single black hair out of place and his perfectly straight eyebrows visible even in the dark. “Wait a minute,” he said. “I know those uniforms. Are you squires?”

“Yes, we are,” Fie said. “Uh, can I ask who you are?”

“I am Basseld Marth, captain of the Wienne Public Safety Corps.”

“What’s the Wienne Public Safety Corps?” Fie wanted to know.

“Recently, we’ve seen an increase in young people turning to delinquency and eventually winding up in gangs and organized crime. The king organized this corps to handle the matter and report directly to him.” He frowned at them in skepticism. “But how odd. I thought squires on night patrol were to be accompanied by a knight at all times. Where is your chaperone?”

Fie hadn’t wanted to be discovered in the first place, but now that they had been spotted, she had no choice but to roll with the punches. *But it’s fine*, she told herself. She’d use the same trick she tried on the gate guards. “We’re on a special mission for the knights,” she explained.

“What sort of mission?” he asked.

“We were told not to talk about it.”

“Interesting. And who gave you this mission?”

Sweating at the intense level of interrogation, Fie tried to answer as calmly as she could, “Sir Crow.”

That shocked Marth into momentary silence. “How odd,” he said. “I could have sworn I saw Sir Crow at a nearby tavern earlier this evening. Come with me. Let’s find out if this is true or not.”

Oh no. Marth was one of Sir Crow’s friends!

His face pale with anxiety, Slad whispered to Fie, “What should we do?”

“Run!” she yelled. If they wanted to find Bruce M’chouchouteman, they couldn’t be caught here! If they revealed the truth of the urban legend, then soon everyone in town would know their names. They’d probably even be picked up by the popular magazine *Nu: Believe it or Not!*, and then, Fie knew, they’d have made it big.

Fie and her friends booked it.

“Dammit!” Slad swore. “Why does it always come to this?”

Gormus grimaced. “What do we do now? He’s following us.”

“And he’s fast!” Although they had taken him by surprise, Marth matched pace. He was now only about five meters behind, and the difference was shrinking by the second.

“Hold it right there!” he yelled.

“What do we do, Heath?” Slad bawled. “At this rate, he’ll catch us!”

Fie grimaced. “I guess it’s come to this.” Then she turned to look at Queen running next to her. “Queen!”

“Huh? Wh-What, Heath?” he asked, slightly thrilled that she had turned to him for help.

She held her palm up towards him. “Sit. Stay.”

Automatically, Queen slowed to a halt as the rest of his friends, still running, pulled away from him. “Huh?” he said. Why did she make him stop? Then it suddenly hit him. He was bait! His jaw dropped as Marth gained on him.

“All right, let’s get some answers out of you,” Marth said.

Then Fie yelled back to him, “If anyone can run from him now, you can! Good luck, Queen!”

“What?!” he yelled back, but Fie had already vanished from sight.

Back with the others, Fie explained rationally, “I’m the slowest in the group, so Queen’s speed is wasted if he tries to stick with me. The smartest move was to abandon him and run.”

Gormus broke out into a cold sweat and muttered, “You didn’t even stop to consider sacrificing yourself first? You’re a fiend.”

They’d escaped Marth but unfortunately also lost Queen in the process. Furthermore, in this game of tag, they had circled back around to the entrance of the neighborhood. They decided to resume attempting to collect info on Bruce M’chouchouteman when they heard a boy scream.

“What’s that?” Fie cried.

“Let’s go check it out!”

They dashed off to the source of the noise, but when they arrived and saw

what was perched on the roof of a house, the group let out a collective gasp. There, looming in the moonlight, was a man dressed in a top hat, black cape, and blue masquerade mask. He carried a pump and sprayer device in both hands.

“I-It’s Bruce M’chouchouteman!” the gang cried.

He was the spitting image of the man in the urban legends. When he saw Fie and her friends, he scampered away with a flutter of his cloak.

“No way...” Slad breathed.

“I can’t believe he’s actually real...” said Fie.

Dumbstruck, the group could do little more than watch Bruce M’chouchouteman flee. Then they heard another wail and suddenly remembered what had brought them here. Fie turned to the crying boy and found him on the ground, holding his face in his hands like there was something in his eye.

Remie dashed up to him in concern. “Are you all right?” he asked.

As Fie stepped closer, she smelled something citrusy. She dabbed a bit of the liquid off of his cheeks and sniffed it again. “I think this is lemon juice,” she said.

“Did Bruce M’chouchouteman spray him with lemon juice?!” Slad cried.

“Never mind about that. He needs to wash out his eyes. This might be scary, but just keep them open, okay?” Remie opened his canteen and poured the water out over the boy’s face.

Now that Fie got a better look at him, she realized he was the boy who had tried to pick a fight with them when they first entered the neighborhood. He opened his eyes again and began to thank them for their help, but then he gasped and scrabbled for something around his neck. “No!” he cried. “It’s gone!”

Fie had noticed it too. The necklace the boy had been wearing was gone.

“Can you tell us what happened?” she asked.

“We were hanging out, and then this weird guy in a top hat came out of nowhere. He sprayed me down with some kind of liquid, and then while

everyone was panicking, he kind of knocked me over... Wh-What am I to do? I'm going to be in for it when my dad finds out I lost the necklace he told me not to take outside." The boy began to sob as Fie and her friends exchanged worried glances.

"Do you think Bruce M'chouchouteman is a thief?" said Fie.

"He can't be!" Slad argued. "He would never do anything like this. He's a good guy, a hero that goes around scaring couples for the sake of such loveless flops as me!" (And that was supposed to make him a hero?)

"Anyway," Remie said, putting in his two cents, "we should help this boy feel better."

The squires were divided on their next course of action, but just then, they heard Marth yelling again, "There you are! Hold it, all of you! The boy got away, so I'm going to question the rest of you!"

"Oh shoot, here he comes. Run!"

Fortunately, it appeared that Queen had gotten away, but Fie needed to make tracks if she wanted to do the same. Somehow, she and the others managed to rendezvous with Queen, but by that point it was too late for any more investigation, and the squires had no choice but to go back to the castle.

When they arrived back at the dorm, they found a revolution taking place.

"Revolution! Revolution!" chanted the boys. "Time for the punishment officer to meet his doom!"

Fie found the other squires attempting to break down the door to the room of the boy who had set Fie on her quest. The role of punishment officer was supposed to change every month, but it appeared this current officer's term was about to be cut short, thanks to the revolution occurring in the wake of his tyranny. Thanks to the harsh punishments meted out to all those who dared speak about Bruce M'chouchouteman, the SMSWDBIUL faction's days were at an end.

"Dammit!" the officer swore. "The barricade won't hold much longer! When

will Heath come? I know he'll rescue me from this mess."

Meanwhile, Fie and her friends tiptoed around the ensuing revolution and huddled in Queen's room. Arms crossed over her chest, Fie said, "It's hard to believe Bruce M'chouchouteman would be such a villain."

"It's too soon to say for certain," said Slad. "Sure, maybe he sprayed the kid in lemon juice, but someone else could have stolen the necklace."

"Slad, that makes no sense."

Slad wanted so dearly to believe in the mystery man's innocence, but no one else in their little crew was willing to leap on board that same train. Still, it was hard to believe that Bruce M'chouchouteman was a thief. Even when he had been nothing more than an urban legend, the stories about him were so exciting that this came as quite a shock. No one wanted to even discuss the possibility.

"Maybe there's been some mistake," Slad argued gamely. "I mean, this is Bruce M'chouchouteman we're talking about. He's one of the three greatest legends of our time. There has to be some explanation for this."

Fie sighed and nodded. "You have a point. I think this calls for more investigation."

"Heath!" Slad cried, turning to her with shining eyes.

Once the squires agreed to reconvene later for another search, the group dispersed, save for Fie and Queen. She looked over at him as he sprawled face down on the bed, his mood sour. "I guess I should make it up to him," she said.

Queen seemed so perfectly content the next morning it was as though nothing had ever happened; Remie suspected Fie had performed nothing less than devilry to accomplish this.

The boys needed to forge another permission slip for their second investigation, so Fie set out to the guardroom only to find Garuge being subjected to a grisly interrogation.

"What's going on?" she cried.

“L-Lad...” Garuge croaked out weakly.

The captain stood next to him, arms folded. “We found that he’s been forging official knight documents, and when asked to explain himself, he refuses to answer.”

Someone had found out about the permission slip. But how? The workmanship had looked perfect to Fie.

As if reading her thoughts, Captain Yore picked up a teacup and said, “I always have those on permission slip duty spill a few drops of tea on the form in a certain place corresponding to the time and date. The gate guards did not know of this, but when I checked later, I found the forged paper mixed in with other, legitimate documents.”

Fie gulped. “That stain is on purpose?” She and Garuge had seen those stains before, but naturally, neither knew they were intentional.

“We have other tricks as well. And funnily enough,” Captain Yore continued, “the man who accepted that forged document said the one he received it from happened to be a particularly short squire.”

His glare bored holes into Fie. Oh crap. Garuge may not have talked, but the proverbial beans had been spilled anyway. She gulped, fumbling for some kind of excuse, before her eyes landed on one of the papers in the captain’s arms.

“C-Captain,” she cried, “what is that?”

It was a map of the neighborhood in which Fie had been the night before, with several locations marked with X’s.

“Oh, this?” he said. “This neighborhood has suffered from a recent string of robberies, but we haven’t been able to catch the culprit yet. Every witness has only been able to give us vague testimonies. We think it’s all the same robber, but we can’t be sure.”

The X’s were very close to the places where people had claimed to see Bruce M’chouchouteman. There were a few discrepancies, but perhaps those places had simply been left out or the teenage victims had lied.

“Why do you ask, Heath?” Captain Yore asked.

He was only asking politely, but she blurted out, “Captain, I was the one who asked Garuge to forge a permission slip for me!”

Captain Yore jolted. “Lad!” cried Garuge.

Fie looked straight into Yore’s eyes as she declared, “I had no choice but to ask him to do that because I needed to leave the castle last night. And, Captain, I also need to leave again tonight! It’s important!”

Bruce M’chouchouteman really *was* a thief, and she knew it’d be headline news if he was captured and arrested. She could see it now—Masked Man of Mystery Turns to Crime. She’d be the most popular girl in Wienne! This was her one chance to make it big! She wanted to be big or at least well known. This was her simple wish as a girl who had grown up a social outcast, the girl who had been overlooked as the king’s second wife. She gave Captain Yore the biggest puppy-dog eyes in existence; the Captain chuckled.

“I see,” he said. “Okay. I’ll give you permission, and I won’t ask why. But only just this once.”

He picked up a piece of paper on the table and quickly signed his name on it. It was a legitimate permission slip.

“Yay!” Fie cried.

Garuge chuckled. “You did it, lad!” The captain smiled to see her joy.

“Thank you both!” she cried, and dashed out of the guardroom. Now, she vowed, she was going to make it big for the both of them.

Moments after she ran out, Crow stepped in and stared, bemused, at the odd sight of Roy standing with his arms folded and a pleased grin on his face while Garuge was strung up on a crucifix next to him.

“What in the world is going on in here?” he asked. With his eyes, he telepathically shot Roy the question, *Are you good?*

“Heath’s growing up fast,” Roy said. “And he has a good eye. I’m sure he’ll be a wonderful knight before long.”

“Uh...huh.” Crow said. Half the time when Roy looked like this, Fie had just hoodwinked him somehow. Crow had a *very* bad feeling about this.

Preparations complete, Fie and her friends set off for town again. “We’re running an errand for Sir Crow!” Fie called as she ran through the gates, brimming with confidence and bearing her legitimate permission slip and her decidedly less-so excuse.

“Time to catch this Bruce M’chouchouteman,” said Slad. This time, they were fully kitted out with ropes to catch him if he tried to run.

“Are you okay with that, Slad?” Fie asked him. “Catching him, I mean.”

“I don’t care. If anything, if we do catch him, he’ll be able to explain himself. Then you’ll all understand that it was a big mistake.”

Well, apart from Slad, the squires felt united by their common goal.

Before long, they arrived at the southwestern corner of the city. Regretting the disastrous events of the previous evening, the squires moved in complete silence to avoid guards and town teens alike, as it had been the boys who had brought the wrath of Marth down upon them in the first place. Whenever he found them, he took them under his wing for their own protection, gave them a stern talking to, and sent them home. (And considering how many of them there were, he must have had quite the busy time of it.)

Fie and her group’s goal was to catch Bruce M’chouchouteman in the act and arrest him, which required them to be around when he targeted his next victim. According to Captain Yore’s reports, the teens tended to be attacked when no one else was around. Thus, Fie and her group tailed the teens whenever they split off from their groups and went home.

“I don’t know if this will really work...” Gees muttered.

“We have no choice,” Fie whispered back as they stealthily tailed yet another lone boy. “This is our only option, and the rest is up to luck.”

The boy turned down a moonlit alleyway, taking a shortcut back to his house. Suddenly, there was a burst of cackling laughter. Slad’s eyes grew wide. “That’s Bruce M’chouchouteman’s laugh!” he said. “‘B(ruce)wa ha ha ha!’ That’s exactly how it’s written in the magazine!”

Alarmed, the boy spun around, looking for the source of the laughter. “Wh-What is that?!” he cried. Behind him appeared a masked figure in a top hat who sprayed him in the eyes with some sort of liquid. The boy cried out in pain and clutched his face. It must have been the same lemon juice as last time, Fie judged. Then the mystery man pushed the boy to the ground and began stripping necklaces and bangles off of him.

“I knew it!” Fie cried. “Bruce M’chouchouteman is a thief!”

Slad groaned. “No... I can’t believe he’s a villain after all...”

The boy’s valuables now in his possession, Bruce M’chouchouteman nimbly skipped away, scurried up the side of the building, and vanished over the rooftops. “After him!” Fie cried. She and her companions chased him to the edge of the neighborhood where the phantom figure, unaware of them, stopped in his tracks in a deserted area just before the bad part of town.

Slad, having regained his determination during the chase, whooped, “All right! Can we catch him, Heath?”

However, Remie stopped him. “Hold on,” he said. “Someone’s coming.”

Two low-level punks swaggered up to Bruce M’chouchouteman. Neither appeared surprised to see him; in fact, they spoke to him as if he was one of their number.

One of the punks snickered. “So how’d it go?” he said. “You get a good haul?”

Bruce M’chouchouteman spoke, his voice as pitiful as any of these wannabe gangsters. “You know it, Boss.”

The man called Boss looked over the finds and crowed, “Now that’s what I’m talking about. We sell this and we’re making the big money, boys.”

The other man, apparently his henchman, chimed in, “You’re a genius, Boss. You were right—you really can make a killing off of robbing those dumb rich kids. Plus, by adding in that whole stupid Bruce M’chouchouteman thing, the kids think some kinda legend is robbing ’em, and they don’t tip off the army. They don’t even try to stop us ‘til we’re already gone. Now that’s what I call smart thinkin.’”

“And don’t you forget it.” Boss snickered.

Now Fie and her crew understood everything: Bruce M’chouchouteman was a fraud! He was nothing more than part of a scheme for small-time robbers to steal jewelry from these wealthy teenagers.

“How dare they...” Fie growled. How dare they disguise themselves as this figure of the squires’ dreams! How dare they target innocent children (no matter how foolish said children may have been)! And most of all, how dare they be just a bunch of two-bit robbers who wouldn’t make her big even if she did arrest them all!

Furious, Fie’s gang leaped to their feet. “We heard everything, you punks!” Fie roared. “You have a lot of nerve if you think you can disguise yourself as Bruce M’chouchouteman and steal from these kids!” Drawing their wooden practice swords, the group rushed at the punks.

“Wha—?!” Boss cried. “What’re these squires doing here?”

The henchman only yelped in fright as the squires descended upon them and finished both punks off, one after the other. However, the person dressed as Bruce M’chouchouteman evaded all their attacks; he might have been nothing more than a lowly grunt, but he was certainly athletic. Some people, Fie thought, had a lot more skill than befit their morality or status in life, often to the detriment of those around them.

Driven back by their attacks, the man stumbled and collided with a teenage girl hanging out with her friends nearby. The girl screamed as he yanked out a knife from his pocket and brandished it at her throat. “Stay back!” he warned. “Or the girl gets it!”

Fie and the others were stunned. This was bad, they knew, but they hurried to reason with him. “C-Calm down!” Remie said. “There’s no need to take a hostage!”

“He’s right,” said Gormus. “Use your brain. If we take you in now, the worst that can happen is that’ll you be charged with robbery. But if you hurt her, you could end up getting the death penalty!”

However, the man was already so agitated and so mean-spirited that he

refused to care. “Shut up!” he roared. “Shut up, shut up! Stay back! Just leave me alone!” He flailed with the knife, forcing them away. At this distance, even Queen couldn’t get an attack in. Sweat flowed down Fie’s back. *I have to do something*, she thought.

Yet just then, a figure descended behind the man and his hostage. The moonlight gleamed off of his top hat, cape, and masquerade mask.

Fie and her friends screamed as one, “I-It’s Bruce M’chouchouteman!”

Sensing someone behind him, the robber whirled, knife at the ready. “Who are you?!” he bellowed.

The second Bruce M’chouchouteman danced past the knife and blew a liquid all over the man. The man yelped and pawed at his eyes, whereupon the second Bruce M’chouchouteman capitalized on this opportunity by sweeping the knife out of his hands and jamming a knee into the man’s solar plexus. The man went down as Fie and her friends ran over to the girl and quickly surrounded her.

“Th-There are two Bruce M’chouchoutemen...” Slad whispered.

“But this one is a fake, isn’t he?” said Remie, ‘this one’ being the disguised robber who was now lying on the ground unconscious, of course.

“Th-Then does that mean that one’s real?” Fie whispered. Slack-jawed, she and her friends gaped at the newly appeared Bruce M’chouchouteman as he sailed to the rooftop and vanished into the night.

Later, Fie’s gang received a small bit of recognition for stopping the robbers, but as they hadn’t managed to bring in the real Bruce M’chouchouteman, no one believed them when they claimed to have seen him. Alas, Fie’s chance of going big had slipped through her fingers.

Marth sighed as he returned home from another long day of work. Thanks to the arrest of the robbery ring, the public now cared more than ever about the security of their neighborhoods, leading to fewer teens hanging around outside at night. However, all the usual suspects remained, which left him with no less work than usual. Still, maybe this was a good thing. Children needed to make

mistakes under the watchful guidance of adults in order to grow; that was the very thing he loved about his job.

After taking a break for a cup of coffee, he crossed to his closet and opened it. “I can’t believe I have to wear this thing yet again.” He groaned. There, neatly put away, lay a top hat, a black cloak, and a masquerade mask.

Back when he worked in another part of the city, there was a similar incident with teens hanging around outside when they shouldn’t have. Therefore, in an attempt to curtail them, the department he belonged to decided to create a legend, a masked man who stalked the streets at night to blow lemon juice at naughty children and teens...Bruce M’chouchouteman. The job of blowing a harmless liquid on the teens to scare them into going home fell to him. Naturally, he tired of this position before long, but when he applied to transfer to a different role, his captain said he was the only one in the department capable of doing it. He had hoped he’d never have to use this wretched costume again, but alas, fate had other plans for him.

Marth smiled bitterly and closed the closet door. Adults made mistakes sometimes too. Let the kids grow up in their own time, he thought.

Afterword

Thank you for reading up to this point in the book. This volume is the result of the four years I spent writing the conclusion to the print run of *Walking My Second Path in Life*. My online readers already know this story, but my various helpers and I ran into a bit of trouble with this book. Now, when I say that, you might assume that some sort of issue occurred when I switched publishers, but it wasn't anything of the sort. The trouble I've had these past four years was the usual kind, namely me periodically failing to make progress and everyone else having to come drag me with ropes, get me moving again, and shove me forward all the way to the finish line. I call this a funny story, although that may not be appropriate considering how much trouble I put everyone through. Still, I'm laughing as I look back on it now and write this, so I would call it humorous. No matter how much it pained me at the time, it's become a memory that I at least personally can laugh about in hindsight.

The spark that lit the fuse on this powder keg, so to speak, was when my editor came up to me and said, "We'd like to publish *Second Path* in three volumes," whereupon I said, "Since this is the third volume, can I write it from scratch to wrap up the full story?" Unfortunately, there was a huge issue with this idea—namely, that I am not exactly a professional writer. I'm just an amateur (yes, I've tried as best as I can, but compare me to a professional author and you'll see what I mean), but I've bumbled along as I tend to do, and with the help of my editor and proofreader I've managed to produce several works that are just barely fit for publication. As a result, I'd never written a full book from scratch before.

As one would expect, I came up against difficulty in the writing process. I spent an entire year without writing, and at that point, I thought I had no choice but to throw in the towel. (Mind you, I probably should have thought that before I wasted the whole year.) However, my editor and everyone else waited so patiently for me. If anything, they were helping me in every way: cheering me on with regular phone calls, keeping me company, lending me writing

advice, and so on.

So the trouble of these four years was less some huge scandal and more of what I just described above—i.e., me not writing. Whenever that happened, my editor would call me, and I'd write a little bit, and they'd call me back, and I'd write a little bit more. That cycle continued, and the little bits built up until, after four years, this third book was finally complete. At that point, it had taken so long that my editor had transferred to a different publishing company, which is the reason why this series switched publishers. They'd been so kind to me that I wanted the book to end up in their hands so, even though this is somewhat absurd, the series and I followed them to their new position. Speaking of my editor, I was on the phone with them the other day, and one of us said, "Wow, has it really been four years?" This shocked both of us.

I've said this all online before, but thank you, readers, for all your many words of encouragement. Let me be real with you—writing this was hard for me. But when I was finally finished and able to share this story with you, seeing you enjoy it made me so glad that I'd written it. It then occurred to me that, had I given up partway through, I wouldn't have been able to experience this heartwarming feeling. Giving up was not only possible; if anything, it was highly probable. There were many times when I tried to abandon the book altogether, but now here I am with the book complete and my heart warmed. Also with me now are the many people who brought me here: everyone who supported me during these four years. There's my eternally supportive editor; Kurodeko, who took on the project despite all the time gaps and transfers and in the end produced some amazing illustrations; the editor in chief who made their very important presence known via phone calls with my editor; all the various members of editorial staff who gave me help whenever I was stuck writing scenes and such; the proofreader who gave me gentle advice about my writing style in the first two volumes; the readers who still patiently waited for this third book after years of inactivity; everyone who wrote me fan mail; and then you, the person who chose to pick up this book and read it. This book wouldn't be here if not for all of you.

In terms of sales, this book would be by no means considered a success, but I feel like I succeeded anyway thanks to all of your kindness and support. From

where I sit in this low point, I must tell you that what I see is something happy, compassionate, and unexpectedly beautiful. I think I'd like to hold onto this moment to remember along with this book, to look back on decades from now.

I have been a selfish author up to the end, and for that, I apologize. Thank you very much for reading *Walking My Second Path in Life*.





Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Chapter 25 — The Circus Is Coming to Town!](#)

[Chapter 26 — An Unexpected Parting of Ways](#)

[Chapter 27 — Handling Fie's Case](#)

[Chapter 28 — Fielle and the Pottery Prince](#)

[Chapter 29 — The Peculiar Second Wife](#)

[Chapter 30 — When the Little Devil Is Gone](#)

[Chapter 31 — Knocked Over with a Fie-ther](#)

[Chapter 32 — A Cloud with a Silver Lining](#)

[Chapter 33 — Not That Everyone's Really Gotten the Full Picture](#)

[Chapter 34 — Epilogue](#)

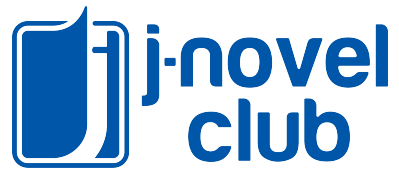
[Side Story — Tracking Down the Mystery Man](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Textless Cover](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Walking My Second Path in Life: Volume 3

by Otaku de Neet

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